The
WRONG
BRIDE
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The Wrong Bride

ARES & RAVEN'S STORY

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This one is for everyone who's ever been made to feel like they don't measure up. You don't need to fit into the boxes others built for you.

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Chapter One

RAVEN

"I can't believe that asshole," Sierra says as she storms into my office. I drop my pencil to my desk and reluctantly drag my eyes away from the evening gown I'm designing.

After a couple of tough weeks, I woke up this morning with my creative block completely gone. I knew exactly what to design for my upcoming fashion line, but with my best friend here, there's no way I'm going to get this dress out of my mind and onto paper.

"Morning, babe," I tell Sierra, suppressing a smile. There's only one person she gets this riled up over, and I have no doubt whatever story she's about to tell me is going to be *wild*.

"Xavier Kingston stole my concept and presented it as his own. He won the project I spent *months* preparing for — *with my ideas!*"

I lean back in my seat and let my gaze roam over Sierra's disheveled, long, wavy brown hair. My bestie always looks impeccable, but not today. Looks like Xavier really got to her this time.

"Weren't you the one who sabotaged him last time? You punctured his tires so he'd be late to the meeting when you knew that tardiness was the one thing the client wouldn't tolerate."

Sierra smirks wickedly, her green eyes lit up with delight at the memory. "If not for that, his company might actually have gotten that resort deal.

That was a multi-million dollar deal. Honestly, I'm kind of disappointed it was so easy to mess with him. Usually he's smarter than that."

I shake my head and lean in, giving her my full attention. She won't leave until she's had enough time to complain about Xavier Kingston, her biggest rival. King Enterprises and Windsor Real Estate have been business rivals for as long as I can remember, but Xavier and Sierra definitely took it to the next level.

"So shouldn't you have expected him to retaliate?"

Sierra glares at me as though I've betrayed her, but she knows I'm right. Honestly, even though they keep sabotaging each other, they both pretty much end up with an equal half of the opportunities that come their way, dominating the real estate industry together.

"I want revenge," she snaps. "That *bastard*. I can't believe him. You *have to* help me, Raven."

I pick my pencil back up and shake my head. "Nope. Not going there." I'm not crazy enough to offend a psychotic billionaire like Xavier Kingston. Sierra is the only woman alive who continuously gets away with that, and I doubt she even realizes that the only reason that happens is because he *lets* her.

My phone buzzes and I reach for it absentmindedly, freezing when I read the caller ID. *Ares*. My heart tightens as I stare at my phone, watching it ring.

"Raven?" Sierra says, her voice soft, concerned.

I look up, snapping out of my daze, and force a smile onto my face. How long have I been zoning out for? "It's your brother," I tell her, before accepting the call.

"Hi, Ares," I say, my calm tone in contrast with the beating of my heart.

He chuckles, and a sharp sense of longing rushes through me. "Raven, I'm surprised you even picked up. You're so hard to reach these days. You're even busier than I am."

I lean back in my seat and smile. It's been a while since I last heard him say my name. "What's up?" I ask, knowing that whatever it is he's calling for is bound to hurt me. Ares is a habit I can't kick. He's a shameful addiction, an illicit secret.

"Want to go shopping with me? I need to buy a present for Hannah's birthday, and who better to ask for help than you?"

I should say no. The *last* thing I want to do is accompany Ares to buy a present for my sister. I can't stand hearing him talk about her, seeing the love and devotion in his eyes. But I'd rather see him gushing over her than not see him at all.

"Sure," I tell him, against better judgement.

Sierra looks at me through narrowed eyes as I end the call. "What did he want?" she snaps.

I smile tightly, knowing she won't be happy. "He needs a birthday present for Hannah."

Sierra locks her jaw and looks away. "Don't go," she says, her voice soft. "Just don't go, Rave. He can figure out what to buy her himself. Why does he need *your* help?"

"It's fine," I tell her, even though I'm not sure it is. It's been years, and I still can't deny him anything.

"It isn't," Sierra says. "I love my brother, but I love you just as much. You need to stop giving him such easy access to you when each and every time you see Ares, you're left heartbroken."

I shake my head in denial. "I'm not, Sierra. Ares and I are just friends. We always have been. You're seeing things that aren't there."

She crosses her arms and stares me down. "Lie to yourself all you want, Rave, but you're not fooling me."

I avert my gaze, unable to keep up my pretence when she's looking at me that way. She's the only one who knows what happened when we were younger, and though I deny it, she's the only one who knows that I'm still as in love with Ares Windsor as I was then.

"Rave, don't you ever wonder what would have happened if you'd confessed your feelings to him after that night—"

I hold my hand up and shake my head. "It wouldn't have mattered. It's always been Hannah he loved. From the moment she walked into his life, she's been all he could see. If I'd told him how I felt about him, it'd just have made things awkward between us. I'd have lost his friendship."

She looks into my eyes, her gaze filled with the same heartache I'm feeling. "Are you really going to stand back and watch Ares marry your sister?"

I turn to face the window and inhale shakily. "What choice do I have? They've been together for five years, Sierra. If there was ever a time to make a move, I missed it. They're happy together, and I wish them well. If

either of them finds out about my feelings, it'd cost me my friendship with Ares, and it'd destroy the strained relationship I have with my sister. And what for? He's never seen me as more than a friend, at best. He never will."

Sierra shakes her head. "I don't know about that, you know? I don't think Ares is as happy as he convinces himself he is, and I sincerely doubt he sees you as just a friend, Rave. He might not be able to admit it to himself, but there's always been something between you two. It was there before Hannah was ever even in the picture, and she was never able to fully erase it. She may have tried, but she's never been able to take your place in his life."

I look down at my hands, unsure what to say. I hate it when she gives me hope that I have no business having. He's about to become my brother-in-law, and I need to keep the boundaries between us firmly intact if I want to survive their wedding.

"Raven, I'm convinced that the only reason they're still together is because they know they have no other choice. Just like me, Ares knows he has to marry someone of our Grandma's choosing… but the one she initially chose for him wasn't Hannah. It was *you*."

My heart aches at the reminder. I still remember the day my parents told me they wanted to retire and decided to merge their independent movie production company, Dreamessence, with Windsor Media. The Windsors and the Du Ponts had been business rivals right until that point, but the proposed merger changed everything — and not just for my parents.

They wanted to keep their beloved company in the family, and since the Windsors are well-known for arranging marriages for their heirs, they were handed the perfect solution. A marriage between the Windsors and the Du Ponts would keep the company in the family, and it'd keep both families in control of the business.

At the time, the one they considered for this arrangement wasn't Hannah. It was me. Due to my friendship with Sierra, they thought I'd be the best fit. I was only twenty when the deal was made, but I'd been happy, and Ares didn't seem opposed to it either.

That all changed when I took Hannah with me to Sierra's twenty-first birthday party. I remember that night vividly. I saw him first, but she's the one he never looked away from.

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Chapter Two

RAVEN

My heart skips a beat when I see Ares leaning against his car as he waits for me in front of my office building.

I pause for a moment and take him in. His dark hair, that sharp jaw, those green eyes that are identical to Sierra's. It isn't fair that he continues to get more handsome the older we get. Each time I see him, he feels a little more out of reach. Ares looks up and straightens when he notices me standing by the entrance, a smile transforming his face.

"Hi!" I tell him as he holds the door open for me. Ares grins at me, and I smile back at him. There's a good chance I'll regret giving into him later, but until then, I'm going to enjoy every second of it.

"Where are we going?" I ask when he gets in beside me, his hands wrapping around the steering wheel.

Ares leans back against the headrest and tilts his face toward me. "*Raven*," he says, sounding petulant. I can't help the way my heart races when he says my name like that, and I involuntarily turn toward him, facing him. "Why don't I ever see you anymore?"

Ares genuinely looks distraught, as though he really has missed me, and that fire I keep trying to douse reignites once more.

"I've just been busy." My voice is weak, soft, as though I can't make myself lie to him with authority. "I'm working really insane hours. I've got

so many modeling contracts, and I'm trying to grow my fashion brand at the same time. Honestly, some days I barely have time to eat or sleep."

He nods and drags his gaze away, a hint of concern in his expression as he starts the car. "Don't overwork yourself, Rave. Remember to take care of yourself, okay? You can't always be working. You need to have a social life too. When was the last time you saw your parents?"

I force a smile onto my face and cross my arms. The older I get, the less I see my parents. Their entire world revolves around Hannah, and I hate going where I'm not welcome. I shouldn't feel excluded in my own home, but I do. "Sierra was actually just in my office," I tell him. "I do have friends, you know."

He glances at me the way he does sometimes, as though he can see straight through my lies and deception, but he nods nonetheless.

"What are you thinking of buying this year?" I ask him, my tone light and friendly.

He glances back at me with a smile on his face. "What do you think of some jewelry, maybe?"

I nod. "A new statement piece, perhaps?"

Ares looks at me with such a blank expression that I burst out laughing, and that just makes him smile in return. "I haven't heard you laugh in so long, Raven. I missed it."

My smile melts away and I look down at my lap, my heart aching. I wish he wouldn't say things like that. He sees me as an old friend and his future sister-in-law, but when he tells me he missed me, it becomes hard to remember that. I tighten my grip on my handbag and inhale deeply. "A statement piece is basically just the opposite of a dainty piece of jewelry."

Ares grins at me. "How about I just let you pick?"

I throw a pointed look his way. "Like you do every year?"

He smirks at me as he parks at one of the Windsor malls, pretty much jumping out of the car to rush around it so he can open the door for me. He offers me his hand, and I take it as I step out of his car, my eyes on his.

A flash of light startles both of us, and I turn to my side to find a paparazzo that has been trailing me lately smirking at me. I grit my teeth and take a step toward him, but he takes off running before I can even say a word.

Ares places his hand on the small of my back, and I look up at him. "I should've known taking you to such a public place would've resulted in

this. I'm sorry, Raven. I'll handle it. That picture will never see the light of day."

I shake my head and take a step toward the mall. "It's fine. I'm used to this. I can't stop living my life just because I know I could be photographed at any time. It used to scare me, you know? Public opinion. Now it's just an inconvenience that I've accepted as part of my job."

Ares is quiet as we walk into the mall together. "Maybe I should get you some bodyguards." His tone carries a hint of anger, and I look up in surprise.

"Absolutely not. I'm never in any danger, Ares. I already don't have as much privacy as I wish I had. The last thing I need is someone in my personal space at all times."

He looks at me as though he wants to argue with me, but thankfully he remains quiet as we walk into one of Hannah's favorite jewelry stores.

The store manager tenses and rushes over as soon as he spots Ares, a nervous smile on his face. He's an older man, and his graying hair looks charming on him. If not for his obvious nerves, he'd exude the kind of elegance that suits this store. "Mr. Windsor," he says, before turning toward me with wide eyes. "*Raven*." His eyes roam over my body the way men's eyes always do. It used to disgust me, knowing they were likely thinking about one of my lingerie campaigns, but I've gotten used to it now. "Raven, *wow*. It's such an honor to meet you. My name is Andy, and I'll be assisting you today."

Ares tenses and wraps his hand around my shoulder. I glance up at him in surprise, only to find him looking at the store manager with barely concealed annoyance. "We'll ask for your assistance when we need it," he says, his tone harsh.

He pulls me toward the glass display counters, his body tense. "What's wrong?" I ask the moment we're out of earshot.

Ares pulls his hand away and shakes his head. "He's unprofessional. The way he looked at you just now? What was that? First, we get photographed the second we step out of the car, and now *this*?"

A soft chuckle escapes my lips as I lean back against the counter and look up at him. "Ares," I murmur. "I'm not the little girl you used to know anymore. I was named this year's highest paid model, and I'm a brand ambassador for many of the products sold in this mall. It's not surprising

that he'd recognize me. If anything, his response was really quite mild. I'm pretty sure my face is on a large banner advertising this mall."

"Mild?" Ares snaps. "*Mild*? He practically leered at you."

I wrap my hand around his upper arm and smile up at him. "How do you deal with being around Hannah? I might be well known, but I'm pretty sure Hannah is even more famous. Models generally aren't as popular as A-list actresses. How do you deal with the attention she gets if *this* annoys you?"

Ares sighs and runs a hand through his hair. "I think you underestimate your popularity. Besides, your sister has bodyguards around at all times, so I don't need to worry about her. You, on the other hand? You're a stubborn one."

I huff and turn back around to check out the jewelry on display, my eyes trailing over the engagement rings. The mere thought of me ever getting engaged seems so inconceivable. I can't imagine ever wanting to marry anyone other than Ares. There's one ring that catches my eye, and for a single moment I let myself imagine what it'd look like on my finger.

I sigh and pull Ares toward the section where the necklaces are displayed, my gaze settling on a diamond choker necklace. "How about something like that?"

Ares calls Andy over, and he hands the necklace to me before pointing to the mirror behind me. I hold the choker up against my neck, wanting to check what it'll look like, and Ares gently lifts my hair for me, wrapping it over my shoulder and out of the way.

"Try it on," he tells me.

I shake my head. "Oh no, I can't. This is for Hannah. I can tell she'd love it without trying it on."

Ares shakes his head and reaches around me, putting the necklace on me. The way his fingers graze over my skin sends a shiver running down my spine, and he doesn't even realize it.

"If you like it, I'll buy it for you, Raven. We can find something else for Hannah."

My eyes widen, and he smiles at me through the mirror. "Your birthday is coming up soon as well, remember?"

"It's too much," I tell him, my fingers curling around the clasp at the back. "But thank you. She'll love it. You should definitely buy her this."

Ares nods and takes the necklace from me, his gaze lingering on my face. “Hey,” he says, his voice soft. “Are we okay, Rave? I feel like you’ve been avoiding me lately, you know? Is it the pressure Hannah has put on you with the wedding? I know you’ve been doing a lot of the prep that she was supposed to do. Just tell me if it’s too much, okay? You know I hate it when you suddenly go quiet.”

I wrap my hand around his arm and smile at him. “We’re fine, Ares. I’ve just been really busy, that’s all.”

His expression tells me that he knows I’m lying, but thankfully he lets it go. How do I tell him that the mere thought of him marrying Hannah makes everything feel so final? I’m truly losing him now, every last bit of hope going up in smoke. How do I tell him that my heart is breaking in a way it never has before, and I’m not sure the pieces can ever be recovered?

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Chapter Three

RAVEN

"I'm not sure we can seat the Astors that close to Ares's brothers," Mom says. "We definitely must invite them. Their family is on par with the Windsors, after all… but we cannot seat them that closely together. If I recall correctly, Adrian Astor strongly dislikes Ares's brother, Lexington."

I frown and look up from the charts. "Adrian doesn't like Lex?" I ask, surprised. How could that be? Lexington is one of my favorite people in the whole world, and he attended Astor College with Leia. He's the one who introduced me to Leia and Adrian in the first place.

"Yes, that's what I heard. From what I understand, Adrian does not appreciate Lexington's *playfulness*."

Ah. I smirk knowingly. Lex must've provoked Adrian by flirting with Leia. Yeah, I can see that. Adrian isn't very forgiving in the slightest, and I have no doubt he'd bear a grudge.

"Fine, we'll just seat them further apart."

Mom nods and rearranges their name cards on the tiny replica model she had made of Hannah's wedding venue. "Everything has to be perfect," Mom mutters. "Hannah has waited so long for this day."

I just about keep from rolling my eyes. "She's postponed the wedding three times, Mom. I don't think she's all that impatient."

Mom looks up sharply, anger flashing through her eyes. “That’s because her work is demanding, Raven. You would never understand what it’s like to be an actress. All you need to do is stand still and look pretty all day. It isn’t the same for Hannah. She doesn’t get to go home after one measly photoshoot. She’s away from home for weeks on end, working on sets that aren’t even remotely comfortable. Do you really think she *wanted* to postpone the wedding? She did that because she had no choice. You might not get it, but the least you can do is keep silent if you have nothing good to say.”

I bite down on my lip harshly to keep from talking back to her. She knows how demanding photographers can be, and how hard I work. Just a few weeks ago, I suffered from hypothermia because I’d been forced to shoot a commercial in the snow. I know better than to compare myself to Hannah, but I wish she wouldn’t dismiss my work as merely *standing still and looking pretty.*

I suppose it doesn’t matter what I do. All she cares about is that I didn’t follow in her footsteps like Hannah did. My mother was a famous actress when she was my age, and she despises that I never had an interest in acting. No matter how hard I work, nothing else will ever be good enough.

My hands tremble as I go through our list of vendors. Why do I keep doing this to myself? Why do I keep coming home to help with a wedding I want no part of, just so I can spend time with a mother that’ll always consider me second-best to her golden child? I’m not even asking her to treat me the way she treats Hannah. All I’ve ever wanted was an ounce of her love. Is that too much to ask?

“I’m sorry,” Mom says, her voice strained. “The wedding has put so much pressure on me, and I took it out on you. I’m sorry, Raven. You understand, don’t you? This wedding means a lot to both of our families. This merger has been years in the making, and once this wedding is behind us, we can finalize the remaining paperwork and leave the merged company in Hannah and Ares’s hands. The Windsors refuse to proceed any further until the wedding is over, and your father and I need their funding.”

I nod, my head bowed. “I get it, Mom.”

She smiles at me then. “You’ve always been such a sweet girl, Raven. Hannah and I are both lucky to have you. I definitely couldn’t have done any of this without you.”

I smile back at her, glad the endless hours of work I've put into this haven't gone unnoticed. Hannah has barely been involved with the wedding preparations, and though it hurts to be constantly reminded of her upcoming wedding, I'm glad I get to spend some time with Mom. It's rare for us to spend any quality time together.

"I can't believe my little girl is going to be someone's wife soon," Mom murmurs as she rearranges the flowers in the replica of the vineyard Ares and Hannah will be getting married in. "When your sister was little, I wasn't sure she'd even live long enough to fall in love. There were so many things I never thought she'd experience, yet here she is, an international superstar, about to marry one of the most eligible billionaires in the world. In the process, she's taking care of both Dad and me too, allowing us to retire at last, knowing our company is in safe hands."

Guilt and unease settle in my stomach. I shouldn't envy my sister, and I shouldn't begrudge her the pride in Mom's eyes. I just wish that sometimes, those same affections were directed at me.

"She'll make for a beautiful bride," I reassure Mom.

Mom looks up, a hint of worry in her expression. "How is the wedding dress coming along? Were you able to make the alterations Hannah requested?"

I nod. Each time she's postponed the wedding, she's changed almost everything about the wedding itself and her wedding dress, resulting in countless extra weeks of working on her gown. "Of course."

Mom hesitates. "It's nice that she asked you to make her dress for her. It's such a nice way to include you. I thought for sure that she'd have wanted a famous brand instead, but I suppose this'll help you gain traction. Once the world sees Hannah in one of your dresses, all her celebrity friends will follow suit. She's a trendsetter like that."

I bite down on my lip. "I've won several fashion awards, Mom. I've had a two-year waiting list for any of my couture wedding gowns ever since I launched my first line, and that list has only gotten longer since Alanna Sinclair got married in one of my gowns. My fashion brand is well-established and no less prestigious than some of the older brands out there."

Mom looks at me with a placating expression that instantly grates on me. "Oh, of course," she says, nodding. Then she grabs one of the wedding invites and holds it up. "Anyway, we need to make sure these are hand delivered three days before the wedding. Everything about this wedding

must be secretive. If the paparazzi show up, it'll ruin Hannah's day. Why don't you double check that everything is well with the courier we booked?"

I sigh and rise to my feet. "Sure," I tell her, grabbing my handbag. "I'll do it tomorrow."

Mom looks up at me and frowns. "You aren't staying for dinner?"

"No. I'm shooting early tomorrow."

Mom nods. "Oh, good. Don't want to look too fat in your maid of honor dress either."

My heart aches as I turn my back to my mother and walk away. Every time I see Mom, I feel like a horrible person, and I end up hating myself. I should be happy for Hannah, and I should feel honored that I'm being included in the wedding to this extent… but I hate it. I hate the person I become when I'm at home. I'm never this desperate for attention or acknowledgement, and though it hurts me to see her with Ares, I've never resented her for having his love. Yet each time I'm at home, my head fills with awful thoughts.

What if the one Ares was marrying was me?

What if I never took her to Sierra's birthday party?

What if I refused to help with the wedding?

What if I made a move on Ares and stole him away?

I'm better than this, but each time I come home, I turn into the most pathetic version of myself.

"Sweetheart?"

I look up at my father, and he sighs knowingly. "Let me walk you out, sweet girl."

I nod and take the arm my dad is offering me. We're both quiet as he walks me to the sports car that Ares helped me pick out.

Dad opens the door for me and hesitates. "I love you, Raven," he says. "Your mother does too, but she just isn't as good at conveying that."

I bite down on my lip for a moment. "She has no problem conveying her love for Hannah."

Dad reaches for my hair and pushes it behind my ear gently. "I know," he murmurs. "Mom feels the need to be so vocal about it because of how rough Hannah had it when she was young. Your mother thinks that she can make up for all the pain Hannah endured when she was sick by showering

her with love now. It’s more for her than it is for Hannah, and it doesn’t mean that she doesn’t love you just as much.”

I nod, unwilling to discuss this any further. I don’t want Dad to pity me, or to reassure me because he feels he should. For a change, I don’t want to be comforted with lies.

I rise to my tiptoes and press a kiss to my father’s cheek. “Love you, Dad.”

“You drive safe, okay? Send me a text message when you get home. I know how to use those emotions things now. I’ll send you a thumbs up back.”

“Emojis?” I ask, giggling.

“That’s the ones.”

“Good for you, Dad. I’ll send you an emoji in the shape of a house when I get home, okay?”

“It’ll be our secret language.” He winks at me, and I just about manage to keep from laughing as I step into the car.

This. This is why I keep coming home, despite my mother’s attitude. Because Dad is right. Deep down, they do love me. Maybe not as much as they love Hannah, but I learned long ago to be okay with that.

I’ll never measure up to my older sister. Not in my parents’ eyes, and certainly never in Ares’s eyes.

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Chapter Four

ARES

I tighten my grip on my phone and take a calming breath. “Hannah, you promised me we’d go together. This is the third time this month you’re canceling on me at the very last second. Couldn’t you at least have given me some adequate notice?”

The phone rustles and Hannah sighs. “I’m sorry, Ares. I really wanted to be there tonight, you know that. I wanted to support Raven *and* be there with you, but I just can’t get away. I need to retake some scenes, and it just hasn’t been going too well.”

“It’s always the same excuses, Hannah. I’m trying to be as supportive as I can be, but you’re making it really difficult. I can’t always be the one who makes compromises.”

“I know,” she says, her voice soft. “I’ll make it up to you.”

“Is this because you don’t want to be seen or photographed with me? Hannah, we’re getting married in a *month*. Don’t forget about our agreement. The moment we’re married, we’re taking our relationship public, so what’s the harm in us being captured together tonight?”

“Ares, it isn’t that. I promise, it isn’t. I’m taking so much time off for the wedding that I just really want to work extra hard to make up for it. I don’t want to be the reason we fall behind on schedule.”

I run a hand through my hair and look up at the ceiling. “I get it,” I tell her, defeated. I do understand it, but I’m starting to lose hope that things will ever change. I used to think I was the luckiest one out of my siblings. Dion never speaks to his fiancée, and my other siblings don’t even know who they’ll be marrying yet. I was the only one that was lucky enough to fall in love with the girl my grandmother chose for me long before we even got married.

Yet lately, this doesn’t feel like a love match anymore, and I’m not feeling very lucky. Everything feels mechanical and forced, and the excitement we should feel regarding our upcoming wedding is missing.

“She isn’t coming, is she?”

I look up to find one of my younger brothers, Lex, leaning in the doorway. His expression is carefully blank, but his eyes betray his annoyance. My first instinct is to stand up for Hannah, but I don’t have it in me today.

“Nope.”

“It’s going to be annoying for you to go without a date. You know what the women are like at these types of events. You’ll just get harassed all night long. I wish I could’ve made it.”

I shake my head. “It’s fine. You have an early flight to catch, don’t you? Besides, you hate the entertainment industry.”

Lex is in charge of Windsor Motors, and if I recall correctly, he’ll be revealing our latest electric car soon. Each of us is in charge of a different part of the Windsor empire. I handle our entertainment firms, Lexington does motor vehicles, Sierra handles real estate, Zane is in charge of our hotels, Luca does asset management, and Dion manages all of our foreign holdings. Between the six of us, we run all of Windsor Corp, dominating far more of the market than people realize.

“I’ll be fine,” I tell my brother. “It’s just a fashion show. I’ve sponsored plenty of those. I’ll just put in an appearance and leave.”

Lex smiles at me. “Raven will be there, so you’ll be fine. She’s the star of the show tonight. I don’t know how, but she just keeps getting more and more beautiful. I really wish I could’ve made it.”

I tense involuntarily and narrow my eyes at Lexington. Since when did he think Raven is beautiful? She’s always been like a little sister to all of us. Has the way he sees her changed?

“How do you know she’s going to be there tonight?”

Come to think of it, just recently they went to an art gallery together, just the two of them. Is something going on between them?

He smirks at me and holds up his phone. “I spoke to her earlier today.”

What? She almost always declines my calls, but she has time to speak to Lex?

Lex chuckles at me, his gaze unreadable. “Tell Raven I said hi, will you?”

I nod, knowing I’ll do no such thing. Something about the idea of Lexington with Raven deeply unsettles me, and it isn’t just because of the recurring dreams I have about her — dreams I shouldn’t be having at all.

I’m in a shit mood as I head to the event, unable to pin down what I’m so annoyed about. I should be used to Hannah standing me up by now, but it never gets easier. For years now, we’ve hidden our relationship, wary of the media’s attention. Hannah has always been scared that she’d be accused of nepotism if people found out we’re together, and I get it. I know how hard she works, and having the media’s attention in that way only spells trouble. I understand where she’s coming from, but I’m tired of it all.

The room is buzzing when I walk in and I pause in the corner, my eyes on the catwalk. I rarely even watch these shows — once you’ve seen one, you’ve seen them all, and I couldn’t care less about fashion. Yet tonight, I can’t tear my eyes off the woman dominating the stage.

Raven walks across the catwalk wearing a tight dress that leaves very little to the imagination, and I take a moment to admire her. She works just as hard as Hannah does, if not harder, yet she never lets anyone she loves down. I know how often my sister shows up at her office unannounced, and my grandmother does the same. I can’t help but wonder why Hannah can’t be more like her. They’re sisters, but they’re so different.

My mind drifts back to the time my grandmother first mentioned a marriage between the Windsors and the Du Ponts. Back then, it was Raven they wanted me to marry. I sigh as she turns and walks back across the stage, a sense of inexplicable loss washing over me.

“Mr. Windsor!”

I force a smile onto my face as I turn toward the organizer of today’s event, making the necessary small talk. So much in show biz is about seeing and being seen, and I’m sick of it. I’m tired of the pretentiousness, the fakeness, of living in a world of make belief. I’m craving genuineness.

“Several of your models walked our stage today,” Jonas tells me proudly. “Windsor Media truly is a powerhouse. Is there anything you don’t own? You’ve got your hands on several popular magazines, one newspaper, the fashion industry, and, of course, your production studio. I’m not sure how you do it all. I’m honored you were able to make time to attend my event today.”

I nod and try my hardest to hold a conversation with him, but I keep thinking about Lexington. Is something truly going on between Raven and him? I’m just about to make up an excuse to cut off the ass-kissing that’s been going on for far too long when the conversation behind me catches my attention.

“I’m afraid I can’t.” I tense and turn around at the sound of Raven’s voice. She’s upset, but she’s smiling brightly at the man standing in front of her.

“Excuse me,” I tell Jonas, a hint of annoyance simmering underneath the surface of my polite expression. What could possibly have made Raven upset?

“Just a single date,” the man says. “I’ll pay you more money for it than you earn in a year.”

My jaws lock involuntarily, anger curling my hands into fists. I force myself to relax the moment my eyes meet Raven’s, a hint of relief in her expression. I smile at her, never taking my eyes off her as I slide my hand around her waist, pulling her into me. “There you are, Raven,” I murmur, before turning toward the man standing opposite us.

He looks enraged for a moment, but then recognition hits, and he averts his gaze. “Mr. Windsor,” he says, his tone much more gentle than before.

I know exactly who he is, but I’ll be damned if I acknowledge him. I stare at him blankly for a moment before turning back to Raven.

“We spoke recently regarding a script I sent to Windsor Media,” he reminds me. He’s a well-known director, and I’d just been about to approve the funding for his new movie since Hannah really wanted the lead role. Too bad.

My thumb moves in circles over Raven’s waist, and she leans into me, her body pressed against mine. Raven is one of the strongest women I know, so her taking solace in my presence can only mean one thing. This isn’t the first time this asshole is harassing her.

“All I remember is hearing you propositioning Raven. It’s interesting, because you cannot afford to offend her.” I chuckle humorlessly. “You want to pay her more than she earns in a year for one date? She’s the highest paid model in the world, and you? Well, I’m not sure who you are. I do know you cannot afford to come within five feet of her, and if you do… *I’ll* make you pay the price.”

His eyes widen and fill with regret as he stares at Raven. I don’t even want him looking at her. She deserves better than this kind of bullshit. “I didn’t know,” he says, his voice soft.

I tighten my grip on Raven and smile. “Now you do, so fuck off.”

He nods and walks away, his jaws clenched, but I don’t give a shit. All I care about is the smile on Raven’s face.

“Still convinced you don’t need a bodyguard?”

She looks up at me, a hint of exasperation in her gaze. “*Ares*. I wasn’t in any danger, so what’s the point?”

I let go of her and shake my head. “How often does this happen?”

“It’s super rare,” she tells me, but the way she looks to her left briefly betrays her lies. She’s done that when she lies for as long as I’ve known her.

“You shouldn’t be left alone at these types of events. You didn’t bring a date?”

There’s only one man I’ve seen her with in recent years, but he recently got married, much to my relief. There’s something about Silas Sinclair that I just don’t like, and it isn’t the fact that he’s one of very few people that are completely untouchable to me. I’ve tried to get Grandma to ditch his firm as our security provider, but she won’t budge on it. I’m not sure what it is about him, but I suppose it’s the way he looked at Raven, or rather, the way he *didn’t*. Raven deserves to be the center of someone’s universe, but she was barely even on his radar. His heart was clearly set on someone else.

“No. It’s just me tonight. My agent will be joining me shortly, but he’s backstage right now.”

My eyes roam over her, and I shake my head. “I never understood it, you know? How come you’ve never been in a serious relationship? How does a woman like you stay single?”

She grabs a glass of champagne off a tray and smiles at me. “I just haven’t found a guy that can keep me captivated. I’m not willing to settle for anything short of complete devotion. I want *epic* love, and I’m willing to wait for it.”

Complete devotion, huh? Yeah, that's exactly what she deserves. I wonder what kind of man will be able to win her over. For a moment, an image of her with Lexington flashes through my mind, and my blood runs cold.

"Raven!"

She glances to her side and smiles before turning back to me. "It's my agent," she tells me. "I guess it's time for an endless amount of supposedly necessary socializing. I'll catch you later, okay?"

I nod and watch her walk away, my gaze drifting to the man she's walking toward. Her agent is staring at her in a way that cannot be described as professional. He looks enthralled, and I shift my weight from one foot to another uncomfortably. I want nothing short of happiness for Raven, but the thought of her falling for someone fills me with dread.

I suppose that's what older brothers feel, isn't it? It might not be identical to how I feel about Sierra dating, but it's pretty damn close. That must be it.

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Chapter Five

ARES

"Give this more news coverage," I order, my eyes lingering on the articles about Raven's couture brand. I didn't realize it last night, but one of the brands on stage was hers. From what I can tell, her latest pieces have been received very well, and they deserve more attention than they're getting.

What's the point in owning several gossip and fashion magazines if I can't use them to push my friend's work? I hope her company continues to grow to the point that she'll have to quit modeling for lack of time.

I hate how she's become the object of men's desires. They can't see beyond her beauty, to the funny and kind woman within. I know how toxic this industry is, and I don't want that for her. I want her safely behind the flashing lights, instead of in front of them.

Raven hasn't been herself recently, and I'm worried about her. I'm worried it's all becoming too much for her. The continuous dieting, the tough requirements that photographers have, the often harsh shooting environments. I never understood why she does it at all. She's beautiful beyond words, but somehow, this career doesn't suit her.

Her fashion brand, on the other hand? That's perfect for her. It allows her creativity to shine through, and she still operates in the industry she grew up in, without being subjected to the very worst parts of fame.

“Bradford Manson called,” my secretary, Dom, tells me. “He wanted to inquire about the script he sent in. Based on your notes, it appears like we’re ready to okay the funding for his project. Should I put that into motion?”

I grit my teeth and look up sharply. “No,” I snap, my thoughts turning back to the way he spoke to Raven last night. “He’s a piece of shit unworthy of being stuck on the bottom of her fucking shoe.”

“What?” Dom says, confused.

I wave my hand in dismissal. “Forget it. I never want to hear that fucker’s name again. We won’t work with him again, and let it be known that any actor or actress that works with him will *never* work with Windsor Media again. The same goes for anyone that gives him funding.”

Dom’s eyes widen. “What did the poor sucker do for you to give him the Kiss of Death? He’ll never work again.”

I smirk at the stupid expression. Being blacklisted by the Windsors has been dubbed The Kiss of Death because it’s a slow-acting poison, and those who are hit with it often don’t even realize it until it’s too late, until they find themselves surrounded by the remains of their careers.

I shake my head. “I don’t give a fuck if he never works again. He should’ve thought of that before he let his mouth run. Let’s see where he’s going to get the money to pay for much of anything. Fucking asshole.”

My secretary nods, his shock apparent. I’m beyond reasonable most of the time — you have to be, in an industry filled with inflated egos. This fucker, though… he’s about to find out what happens when I lose my patience.

“Come to think of it,” I tell Dom, my finger tapping on my desk. “There’s a store manager called Andy. He works in our flagship mall. I want him fired. He works for one of the jewelry stores. I forgot what it’s called. Whatever Hannah’s favorite brand is, that one.”

Dom clears his throat uncomfortably. “If it’s one of the malls, then that’s real estate, and it falls under Sierra’s jurisdiction. You know she doesn’t like it when we interfere with her business.”

I lean back in my seat and stare at my secretary. He’s 6’3” and often mistaken for my bodyguard, yet he cowers at the thought of my sister. I suppose I can’t blame him. My little sister is somewhat unhinged, after all. “Call Sierra and tell her that Andy leered at Raven the whole time I was

there with her, and that I want him gone. Doesn't she want her best friend to be able to go to one of her malls without being objectified and lusted after?"

Dom's eyes widen, a hint of anger in his eyes. "He dared offend Raven?" He grits his teeth and nods resolutely. "I'm on it."

I watch as he marches out and suppress my smile. It isn't just my family and I that love Raven. It's everyone she comes in touch with. She's so easy to love, and the entire world sees it but her.

I glance out the window, hesitating for a moment. I genuinely don't like the idea of her going around unprotected. What would have happened if I hadn't been there last night? What if fucking Brad hadn't taken no for an answer?

I grab my phone and stare down at it, swallowing down my pride as I call the one man I fucking *despise*. He might be an asshole, but he's the best at what he does.

"Silas Sinclair," he says.

I grit my teeth, annoyed at the mere sound of his voice.

"This is Ares Windsor."

"I know. I have caller ID. All phones have that in this day and age."

I fucking hate this man. "I need two extra bodyguards. I want the best you've got, but there's a caveat."

"A caveat?" he asks, intrigued.

I clench my jaw as memories of Raven on his arm come to mind. For years, the two of them were seen together, dating on and off again. I wish there was someone else better suited for the favor I need, but this fucker truly is the best of the best.

"I want them to stay out of sight. They are to protect someone without her knowing about it. I want all threats to her eliminated before they even have a chance to materialize. That includes men that harass her or that won't take no for an answer. I don't care how they do it, but the second she looks even remotely uncomfortable, I need someone to step in."

He chuckles darkly, the sound fucking irritating. "Who is it that requires protection to that extent? Your fiancée? I thought we already put someone on her?"

I look up at my ceiling, an inexplicable hint of nerves running down my spine. "Raven Du Pont."

He falls silent for a moment. "You would go to such lengths to protect her in secret?"

I close my eyes and inhale deeply. “I would.”

“It’ll cost you.”

“I’m sure it will.”

“One favor. To be called whenever I please, and you cannot deny me.”

I hesitate. Silas fucking Sinclair. He knows how much a favor from a Windsor is worth.

“Anything but that.”

“Then I suppose you’ll have to find someone else, Windsor.”

Fuck. This fucking asshole. “Did you ever even give a fuck about her?” I snap.

He laughs, the sound grating. “I did, and I still do. My wife and I both love Raven as though she’s family, and we always will.”

“Yet you demand such a high price for her protection?”

“I don’t mix business and my personal life.”

“That’s bullshit. You founded your entire company to find your wife.”

He laughs again, and never before have I been this tempted to punch someone in the face.

“Yes,” he admits. “Alanna is my only exception.”

“Fine,” I say through gritted teeth. “One favor. So long as it doesn’t harm anyone and doesn’t breach my personal values.”

“Done,” he says. “Raven will never realize some of the most skilled and ruthless men I’ve got are protecting her round the clock.” Then that fucker laughs again. “By the way, you should probably know that Raven has unknowingly had my protection for years now — for free. You just paid one hell of a premium just to keep men’s advances at bay, something I never bothered with. You should probably ask yourself why.”

Then he hangs up on me, leaving me fucking fuming. Fucking piece of shit.

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Chapter Six

ARES

I'm apprehensive as I park in front of the Du Pont mansion. I should be looking forward to celebrating Hannah's birthday tonight, but things just haven't been the same between us in a while, and it's becoming harder for me to ignore it.

With a mere few weeks until our wedding, every issue we've ever had seems amplified. Perhaps I've just got cold feet, but it feels like more than that. Part of me wonders if the only reason she and I even started dating was the knowledge that we'd end up together eventually, through our arranged marriage.

Except... would we have? The woman my parents wanted me to marry was *Raven*. If I hadn't… if that night hadn't happened, would I be getting married to Raven?

I run a hand through my hair and draw a shaky breath. It doesn't matter now. There's no going back in time, and cold feet or not, I'll have to marry Hannah if I want to keep my job and my inheritance.

I steel myself as I get out of the car, feeling oddly out of it. I haven't felt like myself lately, and I'm not sure why. It isn't just about the wedding. It's more than that.

"Ares!"

I look up to find Hannah's father standing by the door, a wide grin on his face. It's been a while since I last saw him, and I have no doubt he's got a nice bottle of scotch to share with me. When it comes to my future father-in-law, I've hit the jackpot. He's a genuinely nice guy, and he quickly became a second father to me. He makes my own father's absence a little easier to bear. The pain of suddenly losing your parents never really goes away, but it dulls over time.

"Arthur." I shake his hand before he ushers me in, the sound of laughter greeting us as we head toward the patio in the back.

"How's work been, son? I've barely seen you around. You staying over tonight?"

I nod. "Work has been busy, but I've freed up the weekend."

Hannah looks up when I walk toward her, my birthday gift in hand. Thankfully, it's just a few of her closest friends and her family tonight. Larger events are too stressful for both of us, and lately it's put a lot of additional strain on our relationship. Tonight is exactly what we needed.

I wrap my arm around her and lean in, pressing a quick kiss to her cheek. "Hey, Han," I murmur, before pulling away and holding up her birthday present.

"Ares," she says, smirking. "I can't wait to see what it is!"

Her friends surround her as she opens the box, all of them equally excited. All of Hannah's friends are actresses too, so I can never tell whether any of their reactions are genuine or not.

"It's beautiful," she says. "Can you help me put it on?"

I nod and take the necklace from her, closing the clasp at the back. "Looks stunning on you," I murmur, even as my mind flashes back to Raven holding it up against her.

She looks into my eyes and smiles. "I was wondering why there were paparazzi photos of Raven and you floating around. The two of you being spotted at a jewelry store sparked some really weird rumors. Turns out it was because of this."

I nod. Ever since Raven became famous, she stopped going out as much, and I can see why. The media goes wild when they do catch her outside. These days I only really see her at the Windsor Estate or when she's with Hannah. Fame hasn't changed her the way it did Hannah — instead, it made her even more of a recluse.

Hannah's friends all surround her as she shows off her necklace, and I sigh as I take a step back. It's so rare for her to have a night off with her closest ones that I'm more than happy to give her space. I've got all night with her, after all.

I grab myself a drink and walk toward the swing in the corner, not even remotely surprised when I see Raven sitting on it, her eyes glued to her tablet. She's no doubt drawing new designs for her fashion brand, and I smile to myself.

I sit down next to her, pushing the swing into motion, and she looks up, her eyes finding mine.

"Ares." There's something about the way she's always said my name. It feels different. It's a strange kind of addiction.

"Why are you sitting here all by yourself, Cupcake?"

She laughs then, the sound soft and refreshing amongst the fake laughter that surrounds us. "Are you really going to call me that for the rest of our lives?"

I nod. "I still vividly remember your cupcake keychain, the t-shirt, the pin on your bag. You were *really* into cupcakes."

She glares at me, but there's no malice in her expression. "I was fourteen, and I was going through a phase, okay? I guess I should be glad we didn't meet when I was going through my emo phase. That would've been a disaster."

I smile and glance at the evening gown she's drawing. It's always astounded me just how talented she is. "You didn't answer my question," I remind her. "Why are you sitting here by yourself? Shouldn't you be celebrating with your sister?"

She locks her tablet and turns to look at me. "I tried." Her voice breaks, and she forces a smile to her face.

Yeah, she probably did try. Raven always does. It never made much sense to me, but her parents have always favored Hannah, making her the center of everything. The first time Raven and I met was because she came on a family holiday with Sierra, because her parents had canceled their vacation in favor of accompanying Hannah to an audition.

Hannah does it too. She takes Raven for granted, and I think she knows it. Raven has organized almost every single detail of our wedding, and even tonight, she's sitting here because she knows Hannah would be upset if she

didn’t show at all, yet Hannah isn’t putting any effort into ensuring Raven is included.

“I’m sorry, Cupcake. I guess we’re in the same boat tonight.”

She shakes her head. “She gets to see us whenever she wants, but it’s harder for her to see her friends, so I get it.”

Raven always does this. She always makes excuses for Hannah. Does she realize that she does that?

“Show me what you’re drawing.”

She nods and settles against me, her arm brushing against mine, a soft breeze dancing on our skin. “I’m thinking of trying various shades of nude with heavy beading. Form fitting but classy.”

She flicks through her designs, and a hint of pride courses through me.

“You’re amazing, you know that?”

She looks up at me, startled. I love the way her cheeks always flush when I compliment her. She’s a supermodel, adored by millions, yet she still blushes like that. Raven truly is something else, and I’m proud to call her a friend.

“Hey, I’ve got something for you. I know it’s a bit early and your birthday isn’t for another month, but I thought you’d want this now.”

I hold up the small paper bag I brought with me, and she takes it with wide eyes. I watch her intently as she takes out the box inside the bag, my heart beating in a nervous pattern. When is the last time I was nervous about something as simple as a gift?

Raven gasps, and I breathe a sigh of relief. “Ares! This tablet isn’t even out yet! I’ve got it on pre-order, and it won’t release for another six months. How did you — “she turns it around and grins when she sees the enamel cupcake integrated on the back of the tablet. “Wow. You... how?! This isn’t just… they don’t customize these!”

Yeah, this was worth all the shit Lexington gave me when I pleaded with him to ask Aria Callahan for a favor. If I’d known her personally, I wouldn’t have bothered with him at all, but I don’t. All I know is that she’s Amara Grant’s sister-in-law, and since Amara and Leia are good friends with Lex, I knew he could make this happen for me, no matter how much shit he gave me. The Callahans are involved in most tech businesses, and if they aren’t, they have the connections that I lack.

“I know someone who knows someone, who knows someone,” I said cryptically. There’s no fucking way I’ll let Lex take the win for this one. He

didn’t earn her smile. I did.

“I love it!” she squeals. When was the last time I saw such genuine joy in her eyes? “I can’t believe you did this for me. You *hate* picking out presents!”

I shake my head. “No, I don’t. I’ve always picked out yours, every single year.”

She frowns then. “That wasn’t Dom?”

“Dom?” I repeat, offended. “Has that fucker been taking credit for all the gifts I picked out for you over the years?”

She laughs and places her hand on my arm, squeezing. “No, I suppose I was just making baseless assumptions. I love this, Ares. I truly, truly love this. This is my favorite present *ever*. I can’t wait to draw my next few designs on it.”

I smile as she turns it on and starts to mess around with the settings. “Do you ever relax, though? You’re always working, Raven. I don’t know many people who work more than I do, but you’re definitely one of them. It isn’t healthy.”

She merely shrugs. “It’s fine. Working keeps my mind occupied. I prefer it that way.”

I stare at her for a moment. “What is it you’re running from?”

Raven tenses and smiles brightly, yet her eyes are filled with a haunted expression. “Hey, she seems to love the necklace. I told you, didn’t I?”

I chuckle and push the swing away from the floor with my feet. Her way of changing the subject whenever she’s faced with a question she doesn’t want to answer will never cease to amuse me.

“Yes, you picked well. Thank you.” I glance at her with a smile on my face. She’s so ridiculously beautiful. I can definitely see why she’s so famous. Hannah is pretty, but more in a girl-next-door kind of way. She’s highly suitable for a variety of roles, and she’s an amazing actress, but objectively speaking, Raven truly is something else in terms of beauty.

“You really do need to take a break every once in a while, Raven. Let me take you to the beach tomorrow morning,” I tell her. “Do you still enjoy watching the sunrise?”

She looks down at her lap. “You’re staying over tonight?”

I nod. “I figured it’d be easiest if I’m drinking.”

Raven looks away, her side profile every bit as beautiful as the rest of her. It makes no sense that she’s been single for so long.

“I think I’ll head back to my apartment tonight. That way, one of Hannah’s friends can have my room.”

I nod, oddly disappointed. Just as I’m about to offer to hang out with her some other day, Hannah calls my name. I look up, and Raven shoos me away.

“Ares!” Hannah repeats, holding out her hand.

I sigh as I get to my feet, glancing back at Raven once, but she’s already got her nose buried in her new tablet.

The closer we get to the wedding, the more I feel like Raven is avoiding me. I can’t figure out why she’s distancing herself from me lately, but I do know I hate it.

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Chapter Seven

RAVEN

The heavily guarded gates at the Windsor Mansion swing open as I drive toward it, my license plate registering automatically. I haven't been able to get myself out of the funk I'm in, and I'm hoping that Sierra can distract me.

All I've been able to think about all week is Ares. I keep thinking of the way he smiled at me when he gave me my new tablet, and the happiness I saw in his eyes when he saw how much I loved it. I hate that he keeps giving me hope without even realizing it. It's in every thoughtful move, every moment we share. My thoughts have been tormenting me lately, my mind conjuring images of him in my parents' house with Hannah, the two of them reciting their vows, him kissing her in bed in the bedroom next to mine. My mind is intent on torturing me, and there's nothing I can do about it.

I just want to forget.

I can't even remember the last time I stayed at home when Ares was there. I run a hand through my hair and sigh. No, that's a lie. I can vividly remember the sounds coming from Hannah's bedroom. Our rooms are right next to each other, and both of our beds are pressed against the same wall. I heard them together, all night.

It was years ago, yet I still can't get myself to stay at my parents' when I know Ares will be staying over. I can't do it.

"Raven, sweetheart," Grandma Anne says when I walk in.

I smile when she holds her arms out and walk straight into her embrace. "Grandma," I murmur, hugging her tightly.

She strokes my back soothingly, and I smile as I breathe in her distinct lavender scent. "Rough day, huh?"

"Rough week," I tell her.

"Come on. I'll have the staff bring out some chocolate cookies that I baked earlier today."

"Wow," I murmur. "It's true love. You love me, don't you, Grandma? I always knew that I was secretly your favorite."

She chuckles as she leads me to her sitting room in the main house. I'd been planning to walk straight through toward Sierra's house, but I can't resist Grandma Anne's cookies. Grandma's home is at the centre of the compound, and it connects directly to each Windsor's sibling's house through elaborate hallways. Whenever I come here, I always stop by Grandma's instead of driving straight to Sierra's.

Grandma sits down and pats her legs. A soft chuckle escapes my lips as I lie down on the sofa, my head on her lap. She massages my head for me, and my eyes fall closed.

"Your heart is aching," she says, her voice soft.

I tense, unsure what to say. I'm worried that she'll see straight through me. Grandma Anne has this uncanny ability to read people, to uncover secrets. It's taken all of me to keep mine.

"Just tired, Grams. I think I've just been working too hard."

"You've been running too hard," she corrects me.

I fall silent, scared I'll betray myself if I speak. I inhale deeply as I focus on Grandma Anne's hands. She's always been able to soothe my worries with such ease. She's always provided me with the home and the love I lacked, never asking for anything in return.

Once again, I find myself wishing it was me who'd be marrying into this family. I love my sister, but I can't help the resentment I feel. It's not just our parents and Ares's love that she has… soon it'll be all of the Windsors. She'll be Sierra's sister-in-law, Ares's wife. They might be used to me coming here, but I'll never *belong* here the way she does.

"Rave! You grandma-stealing little bitch!"

I smile at the sound of Sierra's voice and throw my arms around Grandma Anne, hugging her waist as she chuckles and continues to massage me.

"I thought you came over to hang out with me, but really, you're here for Grandma. How rude."

I hear her chew on something crunchy and sit up, shocked. "Those are mine!" I shout. "They're *my* cookies!"

I lunge at her, but she lifts the plate out of reach. "Sierra, I swear to God. Give me the cookies!"

She chuckles as she stuffs three of them into her mouth, emptying the plate. "You stole my grandmother, so I get your cookies."

I turn toward Grandma Anne with wide eyes, looking at her for support. "Grandma!" I shout, but she merely shakes her head and chuckles, her gaze moving past us.

I turn around to find Ares standing in the corner, his phone pointed at Sierra and me. "How much do you think I'll get paid if I sell this footage of a supermodel fighting for cookies?"

"Oh, no, you don't!" I say through gritted teeth as I stalk toward him.

He smirks and holds his phone above his head. I might be tall, but Ares is 6'5" and towers above me — not that that'll stop me.

I jump up and reach for his phone, annoyed when I can't reach it. "Give me that phone," I snap.

"Or what?" he says, laughing.

I narrow my eyes at him and grab his shoulders before jumping up, wrapping my legs around his waist as I reach for his phone. He's caught off guard and turns us around, pushing me against the wall roughly, his eyes on mine.

I blink slowly, suddenly realizing what I did. "I got it," I say, acting nonchalant as I delete the video from his phone. My smile melts off my face when the next photo in his gallery pops up. It's a photo of Hannah in bed, most of her body hidden behind the covers, and a bright smile on her face. I recognize the room she's in instantly. This photo was taken at my parents' house, probably on her birthday.

I push against Ares, and he lets me down carefully. "Sorry," I tell him as I hand back his phone.

He frowns in confusion. "What's wrong?"

I shake my head and walk past him, toward Sierra's house. She follows me quietly. For a few moments, it felt like we were back in our childhood, before Hannah and Ares started dating. It felt easy and uncomplicated, but reality is anything but that.

"What did you see on his phone?" Sierra asks, her voice soft.

"A photo of Hannah. In bed."

She grabs my hand and entwines our fingers as we walk to her house. "I'm sorry, babe."

I shake my head. "It's my own fault."

"You know what you need?" she asks. "You need to just get wasted. Let's go out and trash talk my dumb brother until you feel better. How about that?"

I nod and tighten my grip on her hand. With the wedding approaching so rapidly, perhaps that's exactly what I need. One night to let loose and force myself to put an end to this.

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Chapter Eight

ARES

"I hate you!" Sierra yells from the backseat, before turning to Raven. "Don't you hate him too?"

Raven nods. "Yes," she says, before looking at me through the rearview mirror, her gaze unfocused. "I hate you," she whispers, her voice breaking.

Something about the way she says it hits me hard, and a dull ache spreads across my chest. I know they're both just drunk, but I've never seen Raven look at me this way.

"And why is that, Cupcake?"

She looks away and rests her head against Sierra's, the two of them cuddled up in the backseat. I sigh and keep my attention on the road as I drive us home, confused. Raven and Sierra mostly keep to themselves, and the last time I caught them drunk or hungover was when they were in college. Why the hell did they drink so much tonight? And what the hell did I do to deserve their hatred when it's me who picked them up at three in the morning, without a single complaint?

I park my car in front of my condo absentmindedly, and it isn't until the girls rush out of the car and toward my front door that I realize I should've taken them to the main house instead. Shit.

"Open it!" Sierra orders, her eyes still flashing with anger.

“If I do, will you stop being mad at me?” I can’t even recall the last time my little sister was mad at me. Even though I’m ten years older than her, she and I have always been close. I’m not sure what’s going on today.

Raven walks up to me and places her hand on my bicep. “Why won’t you let us in?” she asks, her voice carrying a hint of agony. Oh fuck.

“I will, sweetheart. Of course I will.”

I wrap my arm around her waist and pull her along to the front door, unlocking it with my fingerprint. Sierra throws a glare my way as she rushes into my house, kicking off her heels before running to the kitchen.

“Come on,” I tell Raven, but she shakes her head.

“I don’t wanna walk,” she says. “You carry me.”

I chuckle, surprised by her cute voice and her petulant expression. Raven has never asked me for help, and she’s never acted spoiled this way. It’s kind of endearing.

“Okay, Cupcake.” I reach down and place one hand behind her knees as I lift her into my arms. She giggles and rests her head against my chest as I carry her to the sofa. The way she looks up at me… there’s no hatred in her eyes now, but in the car I was certain that’s exactly what I saw.

“Why are you two so mad at me today?”

I place her on the sofa carefully, and she shakes her head. “Secret.”

“Since when do you keep secrets from me?”

Raven laughs, the sound melodious. “I’ve kept secrets from you for *years*.”

“Oh yeah? Tell me one.”

Her eyes roam over my body, pausing on the gray sweatpants I’m wearing. “Every time I see you wearing those, I wonder what they’d look like if your dick is hard. Would I be able to see every contour?”

My eyes widen, and I cough nervously. That is *not* what I expected her to say. “You *what*?”

Raven merely shrugs and bends over to take off her shoes, giving me a clear view of her breasts. She’s not wearing a bra. *Fuck*. Did she go out like that? Silas’s bodyguards better have done their goddamn job, so help me God.

“Don’t ask questions you don’t want answers to,” she singsongs.

I look away and clear my throat. “I’m going to check up on Sierra,” I tell her, before escaping in the same direction my sister disappeared in. My heart races all the way to the kitchen. Raven has never once acted

inappropriately with me. She's never even given me an sign that she sees me as a man at all. What the fuck? What's with the sweatpants comment?

"Sierra?" I call.

I sigh when I find my sister asleep on my kitchen floor, clutching a block of cheese that she's clearly taken a big bite out of. What's wrong with both of my girls tonight?

My thoughts are whirling as I carry Sierra to my bedroom. Even in her sleep, she's mumbling that she hates me. What in the hell have I done to earn their ire? I try to think back to anything I may have done or said in the last few days and come up blank.

I carefully put Sierra in my bed and tuck her in before heading back to the living room, my steps hesitant. I've always been so comfortable around Raven, but tonight I'm nervous.

"Rave?"

I find her sitting on the sofa, her legs crossed. She looks up at the sound of my voice and smiles. "Ares." The way she says my name has always been different. It's always been sexy, but even more so tonight.

She pats the seat next to her, and I shake my head. "Let's get you into bed, sweetheart."

"No," she says, her expression petulant. "Come sit."

I sigh as I do as she asks. "What's up, Rave? Why do you seem so upset tonight? Why does Sierra insist that she hates me?"

She looks at me and tilts her head, clearly drunk. "You wanna know?"

I nod, and she smirks as she draws her knees up before turning toward me. Before I realize what's going on, Raven climbs onto my lap and places her hands on my shoulders, straddling me.

I groan softly at the feel of her ass on my thighs and wrap my hands around her waist. "What are you doing, Cupcake?"

"I want to sit here, Ares."

"You can't."

"I know, but I'm going to do it anyway."

"Raven, how much did you drink today?"

She pulls herself closer, and I grit my teeth. She's sitting right on top of my cock, and though I'm trying my hardest not to, it's all I can think of.

"Not enough," she says. "I've never had the courage I needed, and I think I'll always regret it, you know?"

I've never seen her look so tormented before. I always thought I knew Raven so well, but I'm realizing now that there's a depth to her I've never noticed before. "What is it you'll regret?"

She wraps her arms around my neck and looks away. "Not going after the man I love. If I had, would things be different now? Would I be happier?"

I tighten my grip on her waist, my heart racing. "Who is he? Are you talking about Silas Sinclair?" Does she regret letting him go and not fighting for him when Alanna walked back into his life?

Raven chuckles. "Oh *Silas*," she says. I hate the way she says his name. I hate everything about that man. "No. Silas and Alanna are still very much part of my life, and I love them both dearly. I think I might love Alanna more than I love Silas, you know? She's crazy in the very best way."

I stare at her face, trying to decipher her. "So who is he?"

She looks into my eyes and shakes her head. "You wouldn't believe me if I told you."

"Someone I know, then. Don't tell me it's one of my brothers? Is it Lexington?"

She laughs, her voice ringing with amusement. "Should I fuck your brother, Ares?" she asks as she rotates her hips in my lap. *Fuck*.

"You will do no such thing if you value his life."

I tighten my grip on her waist to keep her still, but it's too late. I can feel my cock harden, and I can only pray she's too drunk to realize that she's turning me on.

"Come on, sweetheart," I say through gritted teeth. "You should go to sleep. You've had far too much to drink, and you'll regret your actions tomorrow."

"I won't," she tells me. "The only things I've ever regretted were the things I didn't do."

Raven looks at me and pushes her hand through my hair, her fingers brushing over my scalp before she tightens her grip on my hair. Her face is so close to mine that I could lean in and kiss her.

I look away, and she laughs. "What are you doing, Rave?"

"Something I shouldn't."

She moves in my lap, and a soft moan escapes her lips when she's got my cock positioned right between her legs. "This needs to stop," I tell her.

“It doesn’t matter how drunk you are, Rave. This isn’t right. I’m your sister’s fiancé, for God’s sake.”

“Yeah,” she says. “But you should have been *mine*.”

I blink at her in surprise. Yeah. If Hannah hadn’t begged me to speak to my grandmother, the woman I’d be marrying would’ve been Raven.

She smiles and trails her fingers over my chest until she’s got the edge of it fisted in her hand. “I want this t-shirt, Ares. Can I have it?”

I look down at it in surprise. “I… what? Why?”

She smirks and reaches behind her, unzipping her dress in one fluid motion. She tugs at it, and it pools at her waist.

“Fuck, Raven,” I panic. She isn’t wearing a bra, and I should *not* be seeing her half naked. I grab the front of her dress and use it to cover her up with. “Cupcake, you’re really testing my patience tonight. I’m trying, okay? I’m trying to be kind and patient, but you’re taking this too far.”

She rolls her eyes at me. “Ugh, Ares. Do you know how many people have seen me naked? Calm down. I walk around naked or barely dressed before every show I do. It’s cool.”

I grit my teeth at her words. “And do you sit in people’s laps like this, Rave? You know exactly what you’re doing.”

She smiles at me. “Should I find someone else’s lap to sit in? Maybe I should’ve gone home with John, after all.”

“John? Your agent went out with you?”

She nods. “I should’ve let him take me home.”

“And what would’ve happened if he had, Rave?” I ask, fearing her answer.

“I don’t know. I guess I’d get some good orgasms and a great fuck out of it.”

I let go of her dress and let it pool around her waist as I wrap my hand into her hair, tightening my grip on it as I bring her face closer. “What the fuck is wrong with you, Rave? You’ve been prim and proper all your fucking life, and now you suddenly want to get laid? What the fuck is going on?”

She smiles and slides her hands underneath my t-shirt, her fingers grazing over my abs. “I asked for your t-shirt, Ares. I didn’t ask you to fuck me… though, based on how hard you are, I suspect you want to.”

“If I give you my t-shirt, will you go to bed?”

She nods.

“Fine. Fine, Rave. I’ll give you my t-shirt, but this ends here, okay? Stop provoking me. I don’t know what’s gotten into you, but every bit of this is inappropriate, and knowing you, you’re going to regret this tomorrow morning.”

Raven smirks as she grabs her dress and pulls it over her head, letting it fall to the floor. “Fuck. You’re fucking naked. Why the fuck aren’t you wearing any underwear, Raven? Fuck. This… this isn’t…” this is wrong on so many accounts. I can’t have my fiancée’s sister naked in my lap. What the fuck am I doing?

“I don’t like underwear,” she says simply. My gaze roams over her perfect body and I groan loudly, my cock throbbing. I’m trying my hardest to control my thoughts, but *fuck*. She’s so fucking beautiful. Her nipples are dark and hard, in perfect contrast with her skin. Every inch of her is beautiful, even those long legs she’s straddling me with. Then there’s her bare pussy, sitting right on top of my cock. Fuck.

I tear my gaze off her and wrap my fingers around the edge of my t-shirt, pulling it up and over my head in one smooth motion. “Come on,” I tell her. “Put this on.”

She holds her arms up for me, and I sigh as I pull it over her head before pulling her hands through, trying my hardest not to touch her unnecessarily.

“Bed time,” I warn her.

She looks disappointed but nods. “Does no part of you want me even a little?” Her voice is soft, pleading, and her eyes are filled with an emotion I can’t quite describe.

“No,” I lie to her. “The friction from you moving on top of me made me hard, yeah, but I don’t want you, Raven. I’ll never want you. I’m not sure what you’re thinking, but you need to stop. Do you know how much your actions tonight would hurt your sister? Fuck, it’s hurting *me*, Rave.”

She freezes and nods as she turns her face away from me. My heart fucking drops when a tear runs down her cheek, and I instantly regret my words.

She sniffs, and my heart shatters. “Fuck, Cupcake. I’m so fucking sorry. I’m sorry. I didn’t mean it, not at all.”

“No,” she says, rising to her knees. “I’m sorry, Ares. I just… I thought… I’m sorry. I-I… I need to go.”

I grab her waist and pull her back to me, my arms wrapping around her as I cup the back of her head and push her face into my neck. “You’re not

going anywhere, Cupcake. Not tonight. It’s okay, Rave. We’ve all had our messy drunken nights, and this is no different. I’m sorry.”

“Not as much as I am,” she whispers. “I should’ve known better. Of course you’d never want me. You’ll never want anyone but Hannah.”

I hug her tightly, my heart breaking. Fuck. Tonight has been one big mess. I have no idea what’s gotten into her, and though I shouldn’t be, I’m relieved it’s me she was with tonight. Had it been any other man, what would have happened?

“Come on, Cupcake. Let’s go to sleep, okay?”

I keep her in my arms and move us over so I’m lying flat on the sofa with her nestled against me. “Just sleep, Rave. We’ll forget this happened tomorrow, okay? I suspect you’ve drunk so much you won’t be able to remember, anyway. Let’s just go to bed, huh?”

She nods and settles against me, but even though I’ve got her so close, I feel like I’m losing her. I had no choice but to say what I did, yet I regret my words immensely. I hope tonight doesn’t change anything between us, but deep down, I know it will.

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Chapter Nine

RAVEN

"Raven?"

I frown at the sound of Grandma Anne's voice behind me and snuggle a bit closer, not wanting to wake up.

"Ares?"

My muddled mind slowly starts to clear, and I freeze when I realize that I've got a strong arm wrapped around me. Fragments of last night flash through my mind, and my stomach drops. Oh no.

I twist in Ares's embrace, waking him up, and he blinks slowly, his eyes finding mine as he smiles lazily. "Morning, drunkard," he says.

The smile melts off his face as he looks past me, and I let my eyes fall closed in shame. "Grandma," he says, his voice tinged with horror. His grip on me loosens. "What are you doing here?"

Ares sits up and pulls me up with him, keeping his arm wrapped around me. I raise my face hesitantly, well aware of what this looks like. My dress is on the floor, and Ares is in nothing but his gray sweatpants, while I'm wearing his t-shirt.

Grandma Anne's expression is unreadable. "Big night?" she asks, and I nod.

"Sierra and I, um… we drank way too much, and Ares ended up having to take care of us."

I can’t face him, not after what I did last night. The way I harassed him last night was not okay. I have no doubt he’ll be furious, and I’ve probably done irreparable damage to our friendship, and what for?

“Where is Sierra?”

Ares clears his throat. Does he realize he still has his arm wrapped around me? “In my bed. Best to let her sleep a bit longer. She was really quite drunk.”

Grandma nods. “How about you two get some more rest too? You look… disheveled. I will have some breakfast sent over for the three of you later. You can just warm it up once Sierra wakes up.”

Ares and I are tense as Grandma Anne walks away, a sweet smile on her face. “I should go too,” I say the moment the door closes behind her. I rise to my feet nervously and grab my clothes off the floor, embarrassment flooding me.

“Hold on,” Ares says, and I turn around to face him, my heart hammering in my chest. “Come here, Raven,” he orders, and I walk back toward him hesitantly, pausing in front of him, his legs on either side of me. He leans back and spreads his arms across the back of the sofa, his eyes on me. I haven’t seen him this way in years, with his torso bare and his abs and chest on display. Does he realize what kind of image he’s painting?

“How do you feel, Rave? I’ve never seen you as drunk as you were last night. Can you even remember half the shit you did?”

I let my eyes fall closed and nod. “Ares,” I whisper. “I’m so sorry. Nothing I can say will make up for how I treated you last night. I’m so ashamed of my actions, and I can’t even imagine how angry you must be. I’m so sorry, truly. I don’t know what I was thinking. I never should’ve… I can’t believe…”

He grabs my hand and pulls me closer. “Not so confident today, are you? Last night you were all too happy to sit in my lap and demand to wear my t-shirt, getting naked in the process.”

I sit down next to him and wrap my arms around myself. “Do you really need to remind me of that?” I ask, mortified.

He chuckles. “It’s okay, Rave. I’m not mad, I’m just confused. You’ve never acted that way before, and definitely never around me. What’s going on with you?” Ares runs a hand through his hair and looks away. “I mean, I get being drunk and wanting to go home with someone, wanting that thrill, the release. But that isn’t you.”

I chuckle humorlessly. “You don’t know me as well as you think you do, Ares,” I say, taking the excuse he’s handing me. “It’s just been a while since I got laid, and I wanted it badly. Anyone would’ve done.”

He narrows his eyes at me and looks me over. “Do you do this often? Get drunk? One-night-stands?”

I purse my lips, unable to look at him. “Does it matter? I’m an adult, Ares. I know what I’m doing. I don’t need you to lecture me.”

“Raven, you need to be careful. You can’t just give anyone access to you. Don’t even dream of ever going home with someone you don’t know, you hear me? It’s hardly safe for a regular girl, but you? You’re the object of so many men’s desires. Who knows what those fucked up perverts are fantasizing about as they collect photos of you. I’ve seen the comments on all your posts. It isn’t safe.”

I wrap my arms around myself, unsure what to say. “Are you going to tell Hannah about this?”

He sighs and falls back on the sofa, his eyes on the ceiling. “How am I supposed to tell her I had her sister naked in my lap? I know you didn’t have any bad intentions and that you were just drunk, but Hannah wouldn’t see it that way. It’s best not to tell her anything at all. I’ve had my fair share of drunken, embarrassing moments. You’re entitled to yours. I just want you to promise me you won’t do this again.”

“I’m sorry,” I tell him. “I won’t ever look at you that way again. I won’t come near you. I’ll keep my distance.”

“*No*,” he snaps, panic flashing through his eyes. “That’s *not* what I meant. I need you to promise me you won’t get so drunk that you aren’t in control of what you’re doing or saying. Do you know how easy it would’ve been for me to take advantage of you last night? I had you naked in my arms, Rave. Do you know how easy it would’ve been to push my sweatpants aside and slide deep inside you? I could’ve pinned you down on this sofa and fucked you raw, and there’s nothing you would’ve been able to do about it. Don’t find yourself alone with a man that won’t respect you, someone who would take advantage of you when you aren’t thinking clearly.”

A blush stains my cheeks as his words resound in my mind. Was he tempted, for even a moment? “I hear you,” I murmur. “I’m sorry, Ares. This won’t happen again.”

“It’d better not. Not with me, and certainly not with anyone else.”

I nod. “It won’t,” I promise. I can’t believe I acted the way I did. For years, I managed to hide my feelings for him, until last night. It’s a good thing he seems to think it’s merely me being drunk, because my actions could’ve ruined our friendship forever.

“I really am sorry, Ares. I’m not even sure what to say to you, other than that I’m ashamed and remorseful.”

He smiles at me and leans in to tuck a strand of my hair behind my ear. “It’s okay, Rave. Let’s just forget that happened, okay?”

I nod and rise to my feet. “I need to go,” I tell him. I need some time to myself, to pick up the pieces of my shattered hopes. I can still hear his words ringing through my mind. *I don’t want you, Raven. I’ll never want you.*

I’ve always known that, but a small part of me thought I could change his mind. Maybe I’m just conceited, but I thought that he’d give in if I made a move, that he wouldn’t be able to resist me. I should’ve known better.

“Who is it?” he asks. I look back in surprise, confused. “Who is the man you were talking about last night? You said you regretted not going after the man you love, and just now, too, the expression you carried was pure sorrow. Who is he?”

I smile at him and shake my head. “Drunken ramblings, Ares. There isn’t anyone.”

“In vino veritas,” he tells me. *In wine lies the truth*. Yeah, that certainly is true for me. I nearly spilled all my secrets because I had too much to drink.

“Fine,” I admit. “I just don’t want to talk about it.”

“Whoever he is, don’t try to fuck him out of your system. That never works, and in your case, it’ll just backfire. You’re too famous, too easily caught up in scandals. Don’t risk your reputation for some asshole that can’t see what he’s got anyway.”

I chuckle in amusement and nod. “Yeah,” I agree. “I’m done. I’m done caring about him, hoping that someday I might have a chance. It’s time to move on.”

He nods hesitantly, and I wonder if at least a tiny part of him realizes that it’s him I’m talking about. With the way I acted last night, surely he must at least suspect it?

“Come on,” he says. “Get dressed, and I’ll drive you home.”

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Chapter Ten

RAVEN

My heart aches as I take my sister's wedding dress off the hanger. It's beautiful, and it's going to look amazing on her. Every second of designing and sewing this was torture. It was a reminder that my unrequited love ends here. Thankfully, Ares doesn't seem to have told Hannah about what I did, and he hasn't given it much thought either. I thought I'd destroyed our friendship, but instead, he's just been texting me a lot more. He seems worried, and it's ridiculous, because he's the source of my agony.

The tips of my fingers brush over the contours of Hannah's dress, my heart hollow. I designed a mermaid dress for her with a separate train that fastens around the waist, essentially giving Hannah two dresses in one. I can already imagine the way Ares will react when he sees her walk down the aisle in this. He won't be able to take his eyes off her, and I'll have to stand there as he looks at her the way I've always wanted him to look at *me*.

"Raven!"

I turn toward the door at the sound of my sister's voice and force a smile onto my face. "Ready for your last dress fitting?"

She nods, her eyes roaming over the dress in delight. "It's beautiful. Is there anything you can't do?"

I smile at her through the pain. "Let's see if it fits or not. I can make some final adjustments the night before the wedding to ensure it fits

perfectly, but I doubt your weight will fluctuate much in the next two weeks."

She nods and takes the dress from me, disappearing into a fitting room where two attendants are waiting for her. I wonder if I'll ever find myself trying on the dress of my dreams. I can't imagine finding someone I'd actually want to marry.

Hannah emerges looking like the superstar she is, and this time my smile turns genuine. She looks beautiful, and seeing her wearing one of my grandest designs is surreal.

"Wow," I whisper.

Hannah chuckles and turns around for me. "It's perfect, Rave. I love it."

She looks into the mirror and assesses the dress carefully. "Did you decide if you're bringing a date to the wedding? Don't forget the NDA. No one can know what event they're actually attending until the day of our wedding, or we'll have the paparazzi swarming us."

"I know," I remind her. "Don't worry. I'm not bringing a date. Your wedding day is all about you, and I want to be there for you. I can't do that if I have to entertain a date. Besides, I'm not seeing anyone."

Because of Hannah's popularity, her wedding has been kept under wraps. Not even her closest friends will be told that the party they're invited to is her *wedding*. Chances of the news leaking are too high, and no amount of security could keep the press away if they caught wind of a wedding between the CEO of one of the largest media companies and a famous actress.

"I suppose it's good that you aren't dating anyone," she says absentmindedly. "You're lucky in that sense, I guess. Enjoy being single for as long as you can. I didn't have that luxury for very long."

Luxury. I smile mockingly, my spine straightening. I'd do anything to trade places with her. "Is everything okay?" I ask, forcing myself to remain kind and calm. These days, the bitterness runs so deep that I can taste it on my tongue, but I can't let it show.

"I don't know," she says, her voice soft. "Ares and I are always fighting these days. We're barely even friends anymore, and it's just insane that we're getting married. Sometimes I wonder if it would've been different if Ares hadn't been my first boyfriend. I'd never been in a serious relationship before him, and because of that, we've always felt like a work-in-progress. Sometimes I wonder what it would be like if we'd met once I'd already

been in a few relationships. If we'd learned our lessons before we got together, would everything have felt a little easier?"

I blink in surprise, unsure what to say. Ares and Hannah always seemed like the perfect couple to me. I never realized they had any issues at all, but I suppose it makes sense that they do.

"There's a certain beauty in growing together, Han. Knowing that everything you two have accomplished, you did together… that is admirable and enviable. Maybe things could have been different, but they aren't, and you two have made the best of the cards you were dealt."

She nods and looks at me, vulnerability in her expression. "Maybe, Rave. I'm not sure, you know? It's just been so hard. The Windsors have so many rules when it comes to our marriage. Did you know Ares and I aren't allowed to stay away from each other for more than three consecutive nights during the entire first three years of our marriage? It's insane, but if we breach their terms, Ares loses his inheritance. They're just so different from us. When I was younger, I thought it was amazing. It made me feel like I was marrying into royalty, but now? Now it's constricting and putting so much strain on my relationship with Ares *and* my career. I can't just take a break from filming for an entire year, and Ares can't always accompany me on set. How are we supposed to abide by the three-night-rule?" She runs a hand through her hair and sighs. "I suppose it's hard for you to understand. It's so unfortunate that you didn't have the talent to become an actress." She pauses. "But then again, it's a blessing too. Your life is so… nice. You have your modeling work and the prestige that comes from that, but you have enough time left to run your own company. My career is far too demanding for something like that. I haven't even been able to help Mom out with Dreamessence, you know? I'm supposed to manage it with Ares after the merger, but where am I going to find the time?"

I stare at my sister as my heart takes a beating. Not enough talent… she knows that isn't true. I quit acting early on when she became anxious about having to compete against me. She begged me to reconsider, telling me that she'd hate fighting over roles, and that acting was very much *her* thing, so I gave in. It was never a matter of talent. Not at the start.

"I'm sure the three-day thing is negotiable, Han," I say eventually, exhausted. I don't have it in me to stand up for myself today. "Just talk to Grandma Anne."

She throws her hands up and sighs. “Don’t you think I haven’t tried? She won’t budge on it. Grandma doesn’t want me to work at all. The closer we get to the wedding, the more I’m second-guessing this.”

I inhale deeply and force myself to look my sister in the eye. “You love Ares, don’t you?”

She nods. “With all my heart.”

“Then you’ll be okay, Han. I know that being with him requires sacrifices on your part, and I’m sure it’s the same for him, too. For years now, he hasn’t been able to date you publicly because of your career. That can’t have been easy on him either, you know? There must have been so many things he’s wanted to do with you and couldn’t. Now it’s your turn to make some sacrifices. That’s what marriage is supposed to be, right? Compromise.”

She nods and turns back toward the mirror, her eyes roaming over her dress. “Yes, I guess so. I guess the worst part is that Ares is so perfect. All of our issues stem from *me*. I know he deserves *everything*, but I’m still having a hard time pushing aside my ego and my aspirations. One year is enough for people to forget about me, you know? Imagine three years.”

I chuckle and shake my head. “You’re Hannah Du Pont. There’s no way anyone will ever forget about you, Han. You could take a ten-year hiatus and it still wouldn’t matter.”

She smiles at me then. “Thank you, Rave,” she says, her voice soft. “I needed this. I needed to talk to someone who won’t judge me for my selfishness, for the thoughts that I shouldn’t be voicing at all.”

I shake my head and smile back at her. “You’ll be okay, sis. In two weeks, you’re going to be the most beautiful bride anyone has ever seen, and soon all of your doubts will seem like a distant memory.”

She nods, a hint of insecurity in her eyes. “You’ll be by my side, won’t you?”

“Always,” I promise. I’ll always be there for her, even if doing so rips my hearts to shreds over and over again.

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Chapter Eleven

ARES

I know I'm dreaming when I see her smile at me so innocently, her body pressed against mine. I've been having this exact same dream for years. She's wearing that same red dress that she always wears in this dream, the one she was wearing on Sierra's 21st birthday.

It's so short that bending her over will expose her tight ass, and the fabric strains against her breasts, barely containing her beautiful body.

"Ares," she begs, "*please*."

It's been years since I last saw her look so shy. "You don't know what you're asking for, Raven," I whisper, my hand tangling into her hair. I clench my jaw and ball my fist in her hair as I tilt her face up toward mine.

Her chest rises and falls rapidly, her pupils slightly dilated. The way she's panting betrays her desire. She looks like she's silently begging me to kiss her, to ruin the red lipstick she's wearing.

"I know *exactly* what I'm asking for, Ares."

My cock is throbbing inside my jeans as I turn us both over, pushing her against the wall. "You shouldn't even be here, little girl. You're too young. Too innocent. What do you think you're doing, huh?"

She smiles at me and slides her hands up my chest slowly, until she's got her arms wrapped around my neck. "I'm not as innocent as you think."

I narrow my eyes at her and take a step closer to her, caging her in, my body pressed against hers. “What does that mean?” The back of my hand trails over her face, my touch possessive. “This isn’t the first time you sneaked into a man’s bedroom late at night?”

She looks to her left and smiles. “No.”

I smirk at her and move my hand back into her hair, needing her with a desperation I can’t quantify. All night, she’s been looking at me like she wants me to bend her over and fuck her, but I didn’t think she’d act on her desire.

“Little liar,” I whisper as I lean in further, my lips hovering over hers. “You know I hate it when people lie to me, Raven. Don’t make me punish you.”

She tilts her head a little, her lips brushing over mine hesitantly. “Punish me, Ares. I’m begging you,” she whispers back.

I groan as my lips come crashing down on hers roughly. I’ve been wanting to taste her for longer than I dare to admit, and this kiss is everything I thought it’d be and more. Raven rises to her tiptoes, her hand hesitantly sliding over the back of my neck, until I can feel her fingers thread through my hair. She moans against my mouth, and I deepen our kiss, forcing her lips apart.

Fuck. She tastes like whiskey and sin. Her tongue tangles with mine, and the way she kisses me makes my fucking cock twitch. I need to know whether her tongue is that skilled when I push my cock into that hot little mouth of hers.

“Raven,” I moan, pulling away from her. My head is buzzing, and we’ve both had far too much to drink. I can barely think straight as I trap her lower lip between my teeth, needing more. “We need to stop,” I whisper, knowing it’s the right thing to do.

My lips move to her neck, and she gasps when I kiss her just below her ear. “You’re my little sister’s best friend,” I whisper.

She looks into my eyes, some of the desire in her eyes clearing. “Is that all I am to you?”

I tighten my grip on her and shake my head. “No,” I admit. “But I’m ten years older than you. This is… it’s wrong, baby. It’s too soon.”

“*No*,” she murmurs against my lips. “It wouldn’t feel so good if it was wrong, Ares.”

Her hands slide down my body, and my eyes fall closed when her hand slips into the front of my jeans. Her fingers brush against my cock, right over my boxers, and I nearly lose my fucking mind. I need to be inside her so fucking badly.

I pull away just enough to look at her, seeing my own desire reflected in her eyes. She wants this as much as I do. My fingers curl around the hem of her dress, and she bites down on her lip when I pull it up.

“There’s no going back from this, Raven. If I fuck you tonight, you’re mine. *Forever*.”

She smiles up at me and raises her arms, a seductive smile on her face as she waits for me to lift her dress up and over her head. “I’m already yours, Ares.”

I bite down on my lip as I undress her slowly, my heart pounding in a way it never has before. I need her with a foreign desperation, but I’m scared to fuck this up. If we do this, I need it to be perfect for her.

“Fucking beautiful,” I groan as I lift her dress over her breasts, exposing her nipples. “You have no idea how many times I’ve fantasized about you, baby. It’s messed up, and I know it, but I’ve always wanted you.”

Her dress drops to the floor, leaving her standing in front of me in nothing but her underwear. She crosses her arms over her chest, hiding from me.

“No, don’t hide from me, my love.” I lean down and lift her into my arms, my touch gentle as I carry her to my bed. I lay her down carefully and step back to take off my own t-shirt.

The way she looks at me makes my cock fucking throb. Shit. I’m already this close to coming, and I’ve done nothing more than kiss her.

I’m oddly nervous as I place my knee between her legs and lean over her. “Tell me, baby… has anyone ever had this pussy before? I need you to be honest with me. The last thing I want to do is hurt you, Rave.”

She hesitates, and then she shakes her head.

“Fuck,” I groan. This beautiful fucking woman… my supposed fiancée. Neither she nor I have formally acknowledged the agreement between my grandmother and her parents, but we both know it’s inevitable. She’s going to be my wife in a couple of years.

Raven moves her hand to my belt buckle and pulls it loose, her hands trembling. “I might be inexperienced, but I want this, Ares. *Please*.”

I smile at her as I push off her to take off my jeans. She grins at me as she rises to her knees with me and pushes against the waistband of my boxer shorts.

I chuckle as I bury my hands in her hair. “You want that off, baby? You gotta do it yourself.”

I tighten my grip on her hair and pull her face closer, barely able to contain my desire for her. It’s been fucking impossible to resist her.

“Don’t think I won’t,” she teases, her lips brushing against mine as her fingers stroke the contours of my cock. Fuck. I need her hands on me.

Her fingers slip into my boxers, and my eyes fall closed when she grabs my cock tightly, pumping up and down. “Ares,” she whispers. “This… that won’t fit.”

I chuckle at her distraught expression. “It will, baby. I promise you. I’m going to make you so fucking wet that it won’t hurt for more than one single moment. By the time I push my cock into that sweet pussy of yours, you’ll be begging for it.”

She smirks then and pushes my boxer shorts down, freeing my cock. That look in her eyes… Fucking hell. She’s so fucking beautiful.

“I need you,” I whisper, my lips finding hers.

Raven moans into my mouth, and I nearly fucking lose it as I lay her back down on my bed, my body on top of hers. My head spins, and I groan. I’ve had too much to drink tonight.

“Baby,” I murmur, pulling my mouth off hers reluctantly. “Maybe we should wait. We both drank too much, Rave. I don’t want your first time to be a drunken mess.”

She shakes her head, her eyes filling with tears. “Please don’t reject me, Ares,” she whispers. “I can’t… I…”

I silence her with a kiss and press my cock between her leg, our bodies separated by nothing more than her panties. I groan into her mouth, refusing to hold back any longer. “I want you so badly, Raven. Don’t ever, for even a single moment, think that I don’t. Whenever you’re in the same room, it takes all of me to stay away from you. I will always want you.”

She looks into my eyes and smiles, a hint of disbelief in her eyes. She and I stay connected like that, our eyes on each other as I trail my hand down her body and into her panties.

“Smooth,” I whisper. “You were ready for me.”

She nods. “I’ve wanted *you* for longer than you think, too.”

I chuckle and capture her bottom lip between my teeth. This is fucking unreal. Raven groans and tilts her head, demanding a kiss, and I give it to her.

My index finger disappears into her pussy with ease, and I groan when I realize how wet she is. Fuck.

I pull away from her and rise to my knees, my fingers curling around the sides of her underwear. “Lift your hips for me, baby.”

She obeys, and I pull the fabric off impatiently before settling back on top of her again. “I need to see you,” I tell her. “The first time you come for me is something I always want to remember.”

She smiles so shyly that my heart skips a fucking beat, despite the throbbing in my head. Yeah, I’ll always remember this.

My fingers slip back between her legs, and I push two fingers into her while my thumb circles her clit. “Tell me how you like it. Tell me how you make yourself come.”

She grins. “Usually, it’s to thoughts of you.”

Fuck. I groan loudly and bite down on my lips harshly. The mere fucking thought of her fingering herself to fantasies of me has me ready to come. Fucking shit. How am I supposed to make her first time good for her when I’m this fucking desperate for her pussy?

“I was going to be patient with you,” I murmur as I press my fingers against her g-spot, making her moan, “but you’re driving me fucking crazy, baby, and you know it, don’t you?”

I circle her clit with my thumb while my fingers press against her g-spot, my touch rough and ruthless.

“Ares,” she begs. “Oh God, Ares.”

The way she moans… goddamn. I could come to the mere sound of her. Raven’s lips fall open, and she looks into my eyes as pure pleasure rocks her body, her pussy clamping down on my fingers viciously. “Ares,” she moans as she comes from me, and it’s the most beautiful fucking sight I’ve ever seen. One hit, and I’m a fucking addict. It’s insane to know she’s going to be mine for the rest of our lives.

I watch her as she comes down from her high, the sweetest fucking smile on her face. “You’re so beautiful,” I whisper. “Did you know I was completely enamored the moment you walked in today?”

Her eyes widen, and I smirk as I line my cock up against her. “Look at me. Tell me you want this, Raven. I don’t… I don’t want to take your

virginity if you aren't sure. You and I… our futures are entwined for the rest of our lives, but we aren't married yet." I meant to tell her I'd understand if she wanted a life of her own before she's tied down to me, but I can't fucking say the words. I can't. I want to be her first and only.

"You'll always be the only one I'll ever want," she promises me, and I push into her slowly. Raven groans, her eyes widening as she adjusts to my size. "It hurts," she whispers. "Just… do it quickly, please."

I bite down on my lip harshly as I push all the way into her, a pained groan escaping her lips as I fill her to the hilt. "So fucking good," I moan, my forehead falling to hers. Her pussy is like a hot, soft vice, enveloping my cock perfectly. I hold as still as I can to give her a chance to get used to me. I'm too scared to move, to hurt her.

I pull away from her a little to look at her, holding myself up on one arm while my free hand traces over her face. "Marry me," I whisper. "I know my grandmother and your parents have already agreed on it, but you and I have never spoken about it. Raven, will you marry me?"

"Ares," she whispers. Her voice sounds further away than it should, and I groan.

"No," I beg, not wanting this to end yet unable to keep myself in this dream. "*Fuck*!"

"Ares?"

I sit up with a shock and look around my bedroom, my eyes landing on my grandmother. She's standing by my bed, her arms crossed.

"You were late for our standing breakfast date," she remarks. "You're never late, so I came to check up on you."

I grab my phone and frown. I slept through all of my alarms. How? Fucking hell. "I'm sorry, Grams," I tell her. "Give me a moment to get ready, okay? I'll meet you downstairs."

She stares at me for a moment, but then she nods and turns to walk away. I fall back onto my bed the moment the door closes behind her and brush my hand over my face.

Fuck.

This fucking dream again. It's tormented me for years now. I might not remember much of Sierra's 21st birthday, but I remember the morning after. It wasn't Raven I woke up to. It was Hannah.

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Chapter Twelve

ARES

I tighten my grip on my phone, my anger simmering just below the surface. “You know how Grandma feels about our weekly dinners. What do you mean, you can’t make it?” I ask Hannah.

“I’m sorry, Ares. I’m stuck in a meeting.” She sounds apologetic, but it just doesn’t ring true to me.

“You’re stuck in a meeting every single week, Han. I’m tired of making excuses for you.” It’s obvious that my grandmother hasn’t been happy with Hannah recently. She made that abundantly clear during our breakfast date this week, and I’m done defending Hannah.

She has shown no real interest in our wedding, and she’s constantly declining invitations to spend time with Grandma. Family is important to me, and it’s the one thing I need us to be on the same page about. But we aren’t. Nothing is more important to Hannah than her career, and I’m worried that won’t change once we get married.

“Ares, I’m already sacrificing so much by getting married to you. Are you seriously kidding me right now? Do you know how many roles I’ve had to decline because we can’t get our schedules to align? Why can’t you be more supportive?”

I grit my teeth and run a hand through my hair. “How could I possibly be any more supportive, Han? I’ve agreed to keep our relationship a secret

for *years* so you wouldn't be accused of nepotism by your colleagues — or inundated with gossip pieces about me handing you the roles that build your career. I've supported you from the sidelines, quietly, and all I've asked for in return is that same level of support. I don't need you to support my career, Han, but I need you here with my family. I need you to be there for our weekly dinners, and I need you to attend some of our charity brunches every once in a while. I need you to start acting like we're a *family*."

"*Ares*," she snaps. "Are you seriously trying to say that you built my career for me? You may have given me the roles I wanted, but I wouldn't have succeeded if I wasn't talented. Don't take that away from me."

I look up at the ceiling and inhale shakily. "You aren't listening to me," I say, my voice soft. "I never said I built your career, Hannah. I said I gave you the roles that allowed you to do so. There's countless talent, but there are few opportunities. I've literally invested in entire movies just because you wanted a specific role. I've never asked you for anything in return, but I'm asking you now. I need you to start prioritizing my family and me."

"This is such bullshit, Ares. Why can't you just be more understanding? Why do you bring up our relationship being a secret every single time, anyway? How come you can't understand my need to keep my private life *private*?"

Why is it that every time I try to talk to her about the way she lets me down, the situation gets turned around and I end up being the villain?

"Han, I can't do this again. Let's just not talk about this, okay? I need to go anyway, or I'll be late for dinner."

"Fine!"

I let my eyes fall closed as I end the call, unsure how we even got here. Things used to be so good between us when we were younger. I'd blame the fame, but it hasn't changed Raven.

I'm in a shit mood as I walk through my home and toward the main house, where my grandmother lives. Family dinner has always been the highlight of my week, and Hannah used to love it just as much. When did that change? When did she stop caring about being a member of this family?

I pause in surprise when I see Raven sitting at the long table, right next to Sierra, Lex on her other side. They're joking and laughing, and a deep sense of longing hits me right in the chest.

She’s been ignoring me lately, her replies short whenever I text her. I’m not sure what’s going on with her, but I suspect she’s embarrassed about how she acted when she got drunk. I wish I could convince her that it didn’t matter to me, that it changed nothing.

Sierra says something to her, and she bursts out laughing. It’s hard to explain, but seeing Raven sitting there fills me with a strange kind of jealousy. This… this is what I wanted with Hannah. I wanted her to be part of this family, to laugh with my siblings.

“Ares. Come take a seat,” Zane calls. I tear my gaze off Raven and walk toward my usual seat between Zane and Luca.

“I’m fucking starving,” Zane says, glaring at me. “What took you so long?”

“Probably arguing with Hannah again,” Luca adds.

“*Boys*!” Grandma shouts.

I glance over at her. Grandma is seated at the head of the table, as usual. She’s the glue that keeps us all together, and I hate that I’m letting her down. Ever since our parents died in a plane crash fifteen years ago, she’s taken on both of their roles. I know it isn’t easy for her, but she does her best and she gives us her all. She doesn’t ask much of me, yet I continue to fail her.

Grandma smiles at me, but I see the disappointment in her eyes. I know she’d been planning to talk over some wedding details with Hannah tonight, and I can’t think of one valid excuse for her absence that I haven’t already used before.

“You’re late, sweetheart,” Grandma says, and I nod in apology. We never start eating until we’re all here, so I kept them waiting.

“Let’s dig in,” I say, indicating that Hannah truly isn’t coming, and Grandma purses her lips as she nods in agreement.

My brothers don’t hesitate for a moment, but what surprises me is that Lexington isn’t serving himself first, like he usually would. No, he’s filling *Raven’s* plate while Sierra looks on gleefully. I stare at them, my eyes moving between them as a sinking feeling settles in my stomach. Something is definitely up between them, and I don’t like it one fucking bit.

“Ares,” Grandma says, and I force myself to look away from Lex and Raven. Much to my surprise, Grandma doesn’t look angry. Instead, she looks curious. “I take it Hannah couldn’t make it?”

I nod, ready to be lectured about the value of family and the importance of our weekly dinners, but she merely nods. “No matter. Raven is here.”

I glance back at Raven and nod. Yeah, she is. Over the last couple of years, she’s attended more family dinners than Hannah ever did. Is that how Raven and Lex became so close? Is she here for him, and not for Sierra?

“Why are you so quiet today?” Zane asks. “No celebrity gossip today?”

“Yeah man,” Luca agrees. “I live for the drama you encounter at work. Fill us in.”

I shake my head, irritated. My brothers are such fucking gossips. Honestly, they’re the worst, and I don’t feel like entertaining them today.

I eat my food quietly, my gaze moving back to Raven and Lex every few minutes. She’s barely said hi to me today, and she’s only taken her eyes off Lex whenever Sierra talks to her. It’s like the rest of us don’t even exist.

I breathe a sigh of relief when dinner ends peacefully, with no talk of my upcoming wedding and no lectures from Grandma.

Raven rises from her seat with a smile on her face, and I watch as she disappears through the veranda doors, no doubt heading for Grandma’s swing.

Lexington looks around in confusion, clearly searching for her. Before I even realize what I’m doing, I find myself following Raven. I’m not sure why, but I don’t want to leave her alone with Lex.

I find her sitting on the swing, her gaze on Grandma’s countless plants, a soft breeze making her hair dance. She looks up at the sound of my footsteps, her eyes widening in surprise.

“Oh,” she says. “Ares.”

“You sound disappointed.” I sit down next to her and push the swing into motion. She looks enchanting tonight, in that yellow summer dress, the shoulder straps nearly nonexistent. Did she wear that for Lexington?

“No, not at all.”

I glare at her inadvertently. “Were you waiting for Lex?” Her eyes widen just a fraction, and I tilt my head in question. “Hmm?”

“I… no.”

I nod. “Good. I love my brother, but he’s not for you. He’s a fuckboy. He won’t get serious with anyone other than the woman Grandma chooses for him.”

Raven bursts out laughing and shakes her head. “Um, are you worried about me?”

I nod.

“Don’t be. Besides, what makes you think I’m after a serious relationship? How much longer are you going to see both Sierra and me as children?”

I grit my teeth and turn to face her. She smiles provocatively, and I lean in, placing a finger underneath her chin to lift her face to mine. “Don’t you even fucking think about it, Raven.”

She merely smiles at me and lifts her brow. “I’m an adult, Ares. So is he.”

I see fucking red at the thought of her in his bed and grab her chin, keeping her captive. “I don’t give a fuck whether or not you’re an adult, Raven. You’re not fucking my brother, you hear me?”

She looks at me defiantly. “Or *what*? You might be Sierra’s brother, but you aren’t mine. You have no right to interfere in my sex life.”

“And I won’t — so long as the person you’re fucking isn’t one of my brothers.”

She narrows her eyes at me. “Why would you care?”

I let go of her and look away, caught off guard. Why *do* I care so much? “Family is important to me,” I end up saying. “Grandma loves you, and so does Sierra. You’re as much part of this family as Hannah is, perhaps more so. I don’t want you to mess up our family dynamics because of lust. Once things end, it’d be awkward for both of you, and it’d affect us all.”

She looks at me as though she’s trying to read me, and for a moment I worry she’s seeing straight through my lies.

“Oh,” she says eventually. “Right.”

She sounds hurt, disappointed. *Fuck*. Why the fuck couldn’t I just keep my big mouth shut? Why is it that I always lose my cool around Raven? For years now, she’s brought out the worst in me. She makes me act fucking crazy, and I can’t figure out why.

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Chapter Thirteen

ARES

"We're planning to acquire the following streaming services," Dom tells me as he gives me a high-level summary of the deals on the table, but I can barely focus on him.

I run a hand through my hair as he prattles on about my schedule, movies I should invest in, sponsorship deals, and who knows what else.

I've always loved my fast-paced and high pressured job, but I need a fucking break. I haven't felt like myself for weeks now, and I can't pinpoint what's thrown me off so much. Is it my constant arguments with Hannah and our approaching wedding?

Or is it Raven?

I keep trying to forget, but every time my thoughts wander, I find myself thinking of the way she sat in my lap, her entire body on display for me. I've never seen her look at me the way she did that night, and it's a sight I can't unsee.

I wonder who it is that had her so messed up that night. I'm not an idiot. It was obvious that she was hung up on someone, and I can't stand the thought of anyone causing her that much pain. What would have happened if I hadn't been there? Would she really have gone home with some random guy? Or with her agent, *John*? Or would she have gone to the man she can't seem to forget? The one she said she loves? Who the fuck is it, anyway? I

haven’t seen her with anyone in a long time. I sigh and force myself to focus on my work, taking my time to read through the reports in front of me.

My office door opens unexpectedly, and Dom and I both look up in surprise. Hannah walks in, a tight smile on her face. “I checked your schedule,” she tells me. “And it seems you’re free, right?”

I nod as she sits down in the chair on the other end of my desk. Dom gathers the documents he brought with him and excuses himself, leaving the two of us alone.

“Hannah,” I say, surprised to find her here. I can count the amount of times she’s come to my office on one hand. Being told that she owes her career to me is one of her biggest fears, so she’s never allowed any rumors to form at all.

“What brings you here?”

She smiles tightly. We’ve barely spoken in recent weeks, and every time we do, we’re arguing. Even on her birthday, we only had an hour of peace before she blamed me for not making enough of an effort with her friends — the same ones she’s keeping our relationship from, neither confirming nor denying our relationship status.

“We need to talk,” she says, her voice soft.

I lean back in my seat and sigh. What fucking now? I get that the pressure is high for both of us, but I’m exhausted. I’m tired of constantly fighting with her. I just want to go back to a time when we were still happy together, when we were looking forward to our future together.

“What would you like to talk about?” I ask, my voice calm.

“Ares,” she says, her voice breaking. “I can’t do this. I… I can’t marry you.”

I put my elbows on my desk and bury my hands in my hair as I let my eyes fall closed. “Our wedding is next week, Hannah. You’ve postponed it three times now.”

“Ares, I’m serious. The more I think about it, the more it torments me. Because of your family’s rules, we can’t spend more than three consecutive days apart for the entire first three years of our marriage, but how is that supposed to work? You can’t take time off from work to accompany me when I’m filming, and I can’t take three years off. How many years do I really have left in my prime? I’m at the height of my career, and I can’t

walk away from that now. Maybe the time will be right for us someday, but we both know it isn't now."

I look at her and take in the pain in her eyes. She really is serious this time, isn't she? "Hannah," I say, my voice soft. "I hear you, honey. I do. But this marriage between us? It isn't just a marriage between you and me. It's also one between our families, our companies. We're lucky that we fell in love with each other, but ultimately, this is an arranged marriage. It's not something either of us can walk away from."

She shakes her head. "I know. I'm not saying I won't marry you at all. I'm just saying not now. Someday, we'll be in a stage of our lives where we want children, and I'll want to take it easier in my career… but that time isn't now, Ares. Marriage isn't something we should mess around with. If we get married now, I don't think our relationship could survive the strain. I definitely don't think my career could withstand it."

I fall silent as her words ring through my ears. Yeah, perhaps she's right, but it's too late now. "Han," I say, my tone gentle. "I know you're worried, and I get that the stress is getting to you, but we're going to be okay. We don't have the luxury of walking away from this."

She rises to her feet and shakes her head. Hannah stares at me, her gaze lingering and filled with regret. "I'm sorry, Ares," she says.

She takes her engagement ring out of her pocket and places it on my desk, staring at it for a moment before she pushes it toward me. She rarely even wore that ring, yet it kills me to have her return it to me.

"Hannah, don't be like that," I plead.

She shakes her head. "I'm sorry."

Before I can even stop her, she rushes away, leaving me staring after her. I watch as my office door slams shut, my thoughts in disarray. This isn't the first time Hannah has gotten cold feet, and it certainly isn't the first time she's been worried about her career, but it feels different this time.

It feels final… and I have no fucking idea what I'm supposed to do.

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Chapter Fourteen

ARES

Lex, Luca and Zane stare at me, none of them sure what to say. That's not what gets me, though. It's the fact that Dion is sitting opposite me in my living room. It's rare for all five of us to be together, since Dion lives in London. The fact that he flew here overnight means they're worried about me.

"What is this shit about you two breaking up a week before the wedding?" Dion asks eventually. "You're supposed to be the lucky one out of us, dickhead. You're the only one of us that actually gets to marry the person you love, and you pull this bullshit."

I run a hand through my hair and look up at the ceiling. "It's not like I wanted to, Dion. I'm as surprised as you are. I knew we had our issues, but what couple doesn't? I didn't expect her to call off the wedding for real."

Luca groans and shoves against Dion's shoulder. "You fucking suck at this consolation shit. Why did any of us think you were going to be our best bet?" He looks at Lexington and nods. "You try, Lex. Put that PhD of yours to good use."

Lex frown at Luca and shakes his head. "I have a PhD in *robotics*. What am I supposed to do? Build him a robot fiancee?"

Zane bursts out laughing. "I bet the robot would still have more character than Hannah ever did. Don't tell me any of you are actually upset

they broke up? Fuck this love match bullshit, because when it comes to Ares, love clearly is fucking blind."

I shake my head and lift my whiskey glass to my lips. "Thanks guys," I tell them. "I feel so much better now."

My brothers chuckle amongst themselves, and it hits me then. They're concerned about me, but the relief in the air is palpable. My brothers aren't upset that Hannah and I broke things off. They're just concerned because I'm hurting.

"Did you guys truly not like her, or are you just trying to make me feel better?"

They glance at each other, and Lex and Zane elbow each other, as though they're both indicating for the other to speak. In the end, it's Dion who speaks up.

"It's not that we don't like her, Ares. It's just that she clearly wasn't the one for you. Hannah is a diva, and some guys are really into that, but you aren't one of them. We all saw how it killed you to have to cater to her at every turn, never getting much in return. She wouldn't even publicly acknowledge your relationship, you know? I always felt like you deserved better than that, so no, I'm not upset she broke things off with you. Someone had to do it, and I know you never would. You'd stick with her, even if it's just to comply with Grandma's terms."

Lex looks at me, his expression pained. "Ares," he says, "tell us the truth. Were you happy with her in recent years, or had you just gotten used to the status quo?"

I grit my teeth and look away. "What the fuck are you? *Socrates*?" I snap.

Luca shakes his head. "He's avoiding the question, boys. You know what that means, right? Ares knows he wasn't happy, but he's loyal till the fucking end. Won't admit it even now."

My brothers nod in agreement, and I rise to my feet. I've had enough of this shit. I don't need this right now. Just as I'm about to walk away, I'm stopped in my tracks by a sweet, soft voice.

"Ares."

I turn to face my grandmother, finding her standing in the doorway with Sierra by her side. Great. Why don't we just have a full-blown family get-together in my house, huh?

Sierra smiles at me apologetically, as though she knows my family is overwhelming me at the worst possible time. While my sister has never said a bad word about Hannah, the fact that she didn't warm up to her even after years of us dating says enough. I'm surprised I never saw it before.

"I'm sorry Hannah broke things off," Grandma says, "but that wedding is happening with or without her."

"What?" I ask, confused. "What do you mean, Grams?"

Grandma smiles. "Hannah isn't the woman I wanted you to marry in the first place. This just proves that I was right. I made an exception for you, and I shouldn't have."

I sink back into my seat, dread washing over me. What is she talking about? She can't be saying what I think she is, right? Surely Sierra wouldn't be standing there so calmly if she was?

"If Hannah won't marry you, then Raven must. If Raven also refuses, the deal with the Du Ponts is off the table, and I'll slash your inheritance in half regardless of whether I find you another girl."

"*Grandma*! I… I can't marry Raven. This… this is *ridiculous*." I turn to look at my brothers for support, but their expressions are carefully blank, as though they dare not admit that they agree with Grandma. What the fuck?

"I can't. Not her, Grandma. She's a friend. I've always seen her the same way I see Sierra, you know that." I look at my sister, but there isn't even a hint of defiance on her face. The same girl who turned completely feral whenever I teased Raven about her braces back in the day just stares at me with a serene smile on her face. Is she truly not going to say a word in Raven's defense?

"Raven would never agree to it," I add. "I dated her sister for years. Why would she ever even consider marrying me?"

The mere thought of forcing Raven into something she doesn't want sickens me. She'd do it out of obligation, and she'd resent me for it.

"Don't do this to her," I plead. "Raven isn't meant to be tied down. It can't be her, Grandma. Give me some time, and I'll make Hannah see reason. She'll be there, Grams."

Grandma smiles at me. "She won't be. I highly recommend that you speak to Raven before I do, Ares. I never should have given you as much freedom as I did. There's a reason your marriages are decided upon by me. It's a centuries long tradition that has never failed us, yet we deviated with you. I was in the wrong for doing so, and I'll be correcting my mistake as

swiftly as possible. I'm not canceling your wedding. It'll happen, and you'll marry the woman I chose for you."

"Sierra," I snap. "Are you seriously just going to stand there and let this happen to Raven?"

She smiles at me and grabs Grandma's hand. "I trust Grams," she tells me. "She knows what's best for you better than you do, Ares. And truthfully? I can't think of a better husband for my best friend than you. You'd never mistreat her, and if given enough time, you'd make her happy, won't you?"

I grit my teeth in an effort to rein in my temper. Is she fucking crazy? I watch as she pulls Grandma along with her, the two of them disappearing through the door.

I grab my whiskey glass and empty it before slamming it down on the table. "*Fuck*!" I yell. I turn to face my brothers, fury coursing through my veins. "Thanks for standing up for me, fuckers."

Dion smiles at me. "Maybe Sierra is right, you know? Maybe Grams does know what's best for you."

I shake my head and grit my teeth. "Fuck you," I tell him. "*All* of you."

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Chapter Fifteen

RAVEN

A hint of unease runs down my spine as I walk into my parents' house. Mom was vague on the phone, and the way she spoke to me made me uncomfortable. She was too sweet, too soft-spoken. I'm not sure what it is she wants, but I'm sure it won't bode well for me.

My suspicions are confirmed when I find my parents in the sitting room, Grandma Anne seated opposite them, their expressions tense.

"Raven," my mother says. She exhales in relief as I walk toward her and pats the seat next to her. I'm hesitant as I sit down, unable to read the room. What exactly is going on here? Wedding drama, perhaps? Did I mess something up with the preparations?

Grandma Anne smiles at me reassuringly, but I can't calm my racing heart. It's as though every instinct is telling me that something is wrong, and it has everything to do with me.

"Hannah and Ares ended their engagement," Grandma Anne says. "She wants to focus on her career for a bit longer, and as such, she has chosen to end their relationship."

I blink in disbelief. She… *what*? I clear my throat and turn to look at my parents, but their grave expressions tell me this isn't a joke.

"I… are we… are we rescheduling the wedding?" I ask, confused. Hannah has postponed the wedding three times so far, so this doesn't

exactly surprise me, but it's definitely really late notice. Most things, including the venue, I won't be able to cancel without penalty.

Grandma Anne shakes her head. "We won't cancel the wedding. This marriage is long overdue, and it was always meant to be an arranged marriage." She looks at my parents pointedly. "We've let these youngsters run wild, and now we're paying the price. It's best to get things back on track as soon as we can."

Mom and Dad turn to me, their expressions grim. "You have to marry Ares," Mom says.

A nervous laugh escapes my lips, and Dad clenches his jaw. They can't be serious, can he?

"Mom," I murmur. "Is this some kind of joke? Hannah and Ares have postponed their marriage several times. This isn't something new. We'll handle it."

Grandma Anne smiles at me and shakes her head. "This is not a joke, sweetheart. I will no longer accept Hannah into our family. If this merger is to proceed, the bride must be *you*."

I run a hand through my hair, confused. "Have you spoken to Hannah and Ares? I'm not sure what's going on, Grandma Anne, but this must be some kind of misunderstanding. How about I speak to Hannah?"

She shakes her head. "Even if she were to change her mind, I'm no longer willing to welcome her into our family. The woman I wanted Ares to marry has always been you, and perhaps this is just life's way of allowing me to correct my mistake before it was too late. The wedding will go ahead, and the bride must be *you*."

I glance at my parents, but neither of them can face me. This… this can't be real. "Does Ares know?"

Grandma Anne nods. "He's been informed. The Windsors have a history of successful arranged marriages, and he's well aware of that. He knows what is expected of him."

I frown, my stomach churning. What exactly is going on? Hannah never even told me she'd ended things with Ares again, and now I'm being informed that I'm marrying him in her stead? This is ridiculous, and there's no way either Hannah or Ares would accept this.

I rise from my seat and walk toward the door, my thoughts reeling. I need some time to think, to speak to Hannah and Ares. I'm sure it's a mere misunderstanding that's resulted in Grandma's radical decision-making.

“Raven.” Grandma’s voice stops me in my tracks just as I wrap my hand around the doorknob. “Your efforts will be futile. Should you wish for this merger to proceed, you’ll have to do your part. You will have to marry Ares.”

I glance back at her, noting the determination in her eyes. I nod politely before I walk out, her words resounding in my mind. Grandma is the sweetest woman I know, but once she’s made up her mind, there’s no changing it. She rules the Windsor family with an iron fist.

I’m absentminded as I walk through the house, unsure of what to even think. “Sweetheart!”

I turn at the sound of my father’s voice and find him walking toward me, an apologetic expression on his face. “I’m sorry to overwhelm you with this so suddenly. The Windsors only just informed us of this change. I wish I could’ve broken the news to you differently.”

I nod as he falls into step with me. “This… Dad, you do realize that this is ridiculous, right? Ares and Hannah love each other.”

Dad shakes his head. “I’m not sure that’s enough anymore. Now that they’ve decided that they’ll no longer accept her as Ares’s wife, love can’t save them. She made her choice, Rave.”

I pause in the hallway and turn toward him. “She made her choice, but I’m the one who has to pay the price.”

Dad inhales deeply, a hint of reluctance in his gaze. “I’m sorry, Raven. They won’t change their minds. This deal always entailed a marriage between Ares and you. The only reason they made an exception is because Hannah fell in love with him. She lifted the burden you were meant to carry, but it was always yours.”

My heart twists painfully, and I shake my head. “If I was always meant to marry him, she should’ve stayed away from him. You can’t expect me to marry my sister’s ex, Dad. You can’t do this to me. Do you understand how messed up this is? You can’t condemn me to a marriage with someone who is in love with *my sister*.”

Dad inhales shakily and looks to the side. “I’m sorry, Raven, but you have no choice. Throughout the years, we’ve relied a lot on the Windsors. If this merger were to fall through, it’d mean bankruptcy for us. If you want to keep your company and the investment funds I promised you, you’ll marry him.”

My eyes widen as disillusionment washes over me. “Are you *threatening* me?”

Dad sighs. “I’m not, Raven. I’m just telling you the truth. If you do not marry Ares, we’ll lose everything. Everything the Windsors have done for us… it would take me several lifetimes to repay that. Think through this carefully, sweetheart. He would treat you well, and the Windsors love you. It’s a small price to pay for everything we’ve been given, everything we stand to gain from this merger. Don’t forget, you marrying Ares means the company will fall into *your* hands, not Hannah’s. I will ensure it. You’ll inherit my shares, even if your mother gives hers to Hannah.”

I frown at him in disbelief. He can’t be serious, can he? He can’t truly think that this seems even remotely appealing to me. I grit my teeth and walk away, my heels clicking loudly on the marble floor.

I need to find Hannah. I don’t know what she’s thinking, but I refuse to take responsibility for her mess. I might love Ares, but I have no intention of accepting her sloppy seconds.

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Chapter Sixteen

RAVEN

I pull up in front of Hannah's apartment and walk straight in. Whenever something major happens, Hannah always hides away at home instead of facing the consequences of her actions. She looks up from her seat on the sofa, her eyes red.

I sigh as I take in the panda onesie she's wearing and the popcorn on the table. Of course she's watching The Notebook. Part of me sympathizes with her. The choice she made isn't an easy one, and for her to do this a week before the wedding means she's serious. It must have been heartbreaking, knowing she couldn't have both her career and Ares.

"Raven." She holds her arms up and I bite back a smile as I sit down next to her, giving in to her silent plea for a hug. I wrap my arms around her and rub her back as she rests her head on my shoulder. "I'm sorry," she tells me. "I know how much time you put into this wedding, but I can't do this. I can't sacrifice my career, and even though I love Ares, I'm not willing to abide by his family's suffocating rules for the rest of my life. I can't live like that, Rave."

I pull back to look at her, my gaze searching. Dad hasn't told her, has he? "Hannah," I murmur. "You *have to* do this. It's too late to walk away now. There really is no going back anymore, Han. If you walk away now, that's it. It's the end of Ares and you. Do you really want that? I know you

love him, and he worships the ground you walk on. I know he makes you happy, Han."

She shakes her head. "I can't, Rave. I really can't. If I marry him, I'll just end up resenting him for everything I'll lose in the process."

"Hannah." My voice is soft yet chastising. "This isn't just a love marriage, though. It's an arranged marriage. Have you thought of what will happen to Mom and Dad? The company and everything we own? Without the Windsors' support, we can't survive."

She wraps her arms around herself, a hint of insecurity in her gaze. "They won't harm us. You know they won't."

I cross my arms and stare her down. "Grandma Anne came to the house today, Han. She insists that the wedding take place next week… with or without you. If you don't do this, they'll… they'll make me marry him in your stead."

Hannah's eyes widen, and she falls silent. "*What*? You can't be serious?"

I nod. "I am. Dad told me that if I don't, I'll lose my company and all the money he promised to invest in me. Grandma Anne warned him that she'll pull away all support if this marriage falls through."

She runs a hand through her hair. "They're just trying to strong-arm me, Raven. They won't actually make you do that. Besides, Ares wouldn't ever agree to it. That's sick."

My heart clenches painfully even as I nod. *Sick*. *Twisted*. That's probably what he thinks of this entire situation, too. "I'm not sure, Han. I don't think they're merely bluffing. Dad seemed worried, and I've never seen Grandma Anne look quite so serious."

Hannah shakes her head. "Don't worry," she reassures me. "You won't be forced to do anything, Rave. They won't make you. They're merely threatening us and using you to make me change my mind, but I won't."

"Hannah," I plead. "Can you truly bear to watch Ares marry someone else? Marry *me?* I know you love him, Han, so please think about this carefully. If they aren't bluffing, then what? Will you really stand back and become Ares's sister-in-law? Because that's what'll happen if you see this through. Dad made it quite clear that if you're not there on your wedding day, I'll have to walk down the aisle in your stead, or I'll lose everything I've worked for."

I know Grandma said she wouldn’t accept Hannah at all anymore, but I’m certain she wouldn’t object if Hannah changed her mind now. All she’s ever wanted is for Ares to be happy, and his happiness lies with Hannah. It always has.

Hannah looks away and runs a hand through her hair. “I’m certain, Rave. I can’t do this. I won’t sign away my life for anyone — not even Ares.”

I stare at her in disbelief. “Even if it means he’ll marry someone else?”

She nods. “If that is our fate, then so be it.”

I grab her shoulders and shake her. “Hannah!” I snap. “Be reasonable, for God’s sake. Can’t you see what you’re doing to me? You’ll get off easy, but what about me? I’ll be stuck having to marry a man who has only ever loved *you*, and if I refuse, I’ll lose *my* career. Don’t do this to me, Han. Don’t do this to Ares.”

She looks into my eyes, her expression a mixture of defiance and disbelief. “It won’t come to that, Raven. You won’t lose your company. Neither Dad nor Grandma Anne would ever let that happen. She loves you more than she’s ever loved me, you know? Even if I don’t marry Ares, she won’t punish you for it. Don’t worry, okay? You won’t get trapped in a loveless marriage, or whatever it is that’s going through your mind. Forget the fear Dad instilled in you, Rave. Everything is going to be okay. I promise.”

I shake my head. “No,” I whisper. “Everything *won’t* be.” I don’t know how to make her see reason. If Hannah doesn’t change her mind, she’ll be destroying three lives, including her own.

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Chapter Seventeen

ARES

I pause at the sound of Raven’s voice and lean back against Sierra’s bedroom door, my eyes falling closed. Who am I kidding? I came here because I knew this is where I’d find her, and not because I wanted to speak to my sister.

“I’m worried I won’t be able to change her mind,” Raven says. “With just a few days left, my anxiety is off the charts. If Hannah doesn’t show up on her wedding day, *I’ll* be the one getting married.”

“Would that really be so bad?” Sierra replies.

My heart races as I wait for Raven’s answer, but all that follows is silence. I brace myself and straighten my spine before knocking on Sierra's door. The door opens, and my sister's eyes widen when she sees me standing here.

I can count the amount of times I have been here on one hand. Being forced to live so close together meant that my siblings and I are very protective of our privacy, and normally I would never breach our unspoken rule of respecting each other’s private space when we aren’t in communal areas.

Today, however, is an exception. I'm not here for Sierra. I'm here for Raven. I look past my sister into hazel eyes that carry a hint of agony.

"Raven, can I speak to you for a moment?"

She hesitates, but then she nods and rises from her seated position on my sister's bed. She walks up to me, her dress swaying. Even when she looks this distraught, she's beautiful.

"Follow me."

She falls into step with me as I lead her to my house. "Where are we going?" she asks, her voice soft.

“My place.”

It's strange to think that Raven might soon be living there with me. Neither of us wants this, but with each passing day it's becoming more and more clear to me that this is inevitable.

Both of us are just caught in a web of our own deception, convincing ourselves that Hannah will change her mind, that everything will be the way it should be.

But we both know better.

Raven is quiet as she follows me down the long hallway that connects Sierra's house to the main house. Perhaps it would have been better to take her to the main living room, but I'm not certain our conversation would be private there.

I lead her to my home, suddenly seeing it through fresh eyes. Hannah designed and decorated most of this throughout the years, both of us expecting to live here together someday. I wonder what Raven thinks of it. Does she like the monochrome theme Hannah went with? I can't imagine what it must be like to even entertain the thought of having to live your sister's life.

"Can I offer you a drink?" I ask as she sits down on my white leather sofa, the same one she and I fell asleep on just a few weeks ago.

Raven shakes her head and looks up at me questioningly. "I'm okay," she says. "What is it you want to talk about?"

I sit down next to her and turn to face her. "You know exactly what I need to talk to you about, Raven. We can neither avoid nor ignore this for much longer."

She looks down, trying her best to hide her distress from me. "Ares," she whispers, her voice breaking.

I can't stand seeing that torment in her demeanor. I hate knowing that I played a role in the pain she's feeling, and it kills me to know that from here on out, I will only break her heart more.

"I'll speak to her," she promises, but I shake my head and grab her hand.

"You know that won't make a difference. Don't you think I've tried?"

Her eyes drop to our joined hands and she pulls her hand out of mine, cradling it as though she can't bear my touch.

"We have to try again," she tells me. Raven lifts her face to look at me, and her expression guts me. She looks so hopeless, so heartbroken. Does the thought of marrying me hurt that much?

"Cupcake," I whisper. "We are out of time and out of options. I know this isn't what you want, and never in a million years did I expect we would find ourselves in this situation… But here we are. Neither one of us can walk away from this, so aren't we better off facing this together?"

She looks into my eyes, her expression torn. "Ares," she says, "I can't marry you. *I can't.* How could you possibly even entertain that idea when you've been in love with my sister for as long as I can remember? How could you consider making me your wife when the only woman you'll ever want is Hannah?"

I look into her eyes, unsure how to answer her. She's right. Even as I sit here with her, my heart aches at the thought of Hannah and everything I thought we'd have together.

"Raven," I murmur. "It's an arranged marriage. So long as there's affection and respect, we'll be fine. We've been friends for years, haven't we? What better foundation could we ask for?"

She huffs and looks away. "Ares, I want love. *Real love*. I want a happy marriage and a faithful husband. Can you give me that?"

I study the contours of her face. Her cute nose and her sharp jaw. She's refusing to face me because she fears what my answer will be, and I wish things could be different between us. If I could go back in time, would I still make the choices I made?

"Yes," I tell her. "I can't guarantee that I'll make you happy, but I swear to try. As for being a faithful husband? Yes, Raven. I'm surprised you even feel the need to ask. From the moment you become my wife, I swear to be faithful to you."

She turns to face me, her brows raised. "That's easy for you to say now that you're trying to coerce me into this marriage, but what will that look like in practise, Ares? Will you be able to stay away from Hannah?"

I clench my jaw and nod. "Yes, Raven. I would never cheat on my wife. I may be imperfect, but I'm not immoral. I'd never disrespect you or our

marriage like that. Hannah made her choice when she ended things between us, and there's no going back now."

She looks into my eyes, her gaze provocative. "Do you truly believe you'll want me someday? Will you ever be able to look at me without thinking of Hannah?" Her gaze travels over my body, pausing on my suit pants for a moment. "Or do you intend to remain celibate throughout our marriage? I sat in your lap, *naked*, and you still didn't want me."

I run a hand through my hair, thoughts of Raven underneath me flashing through my mind. That recurring dream I have would no longer be a forbidden fantasy. "Raven," I whisper. "You're one of the most beautiful women alive. I don't stand a chance at resisting you. Every second of you being in my lap was torture, but I couldn't… I'm not a cheater, Raven. I would never have touched you then."

Her expression looks disarmed, surprise flickering through her eyes. I can't help but smile at her, a hint of embarrassment making me avert my gaze. I never dared to admit to myself how stunning she truly is, how attractive I find her. Raven has always been someone that's entirely off-limits to me in that way. Until now.

"Ares, if we do this… if it really gets to that point… I need you to know that I expect more than just affection and respect. I expect you to keep an appropriate distance from my sister, regardless of your history. If I make this sacrifice, I won't allow you to make me regret it. If I marry you, I want you to treat me as your wife."

Her fierce expression sets my heart ablaze, and I force myself to stay calm. What is she saying? Does she mean… does she mean she expects us to make this marriage work? I thought what she'd want would be a true marriage of convenience, but could I have been wrong?

"So long as it's within my power, there's nothing I won't give you, Raven. No matter what you ask, it's yours — and that includes *me*."

Her eyes widen slightly, and she nods briefly before tearing her gaze away. "You won't regret this?" she asks. "You won't regret sacrificing your happiness for your inheritance? When all is said and done, will you resent me for standing between Hannah and you?"

I cup her face gently and tilt her face toward mine. "No," I promise her. "I won't resent you, Raven. This situation is unfortunate for both of us, and I'll always remember that you're giving up just as much as I am. I can't resent you for a choice *Hannah* made. I won't do that to you."

She nods, her expression unreadable. Raven has always been sweet and kind. The woman looking back at me right now is one I don't recognize, and I'm not sure how I feel about it. Nothing about this conversation went the way I expected it to.

I assumed she'd tell me that even if we end up married, we'd never have more than friendship. I didn't expect her to ask me for fidelity. Until the words escaped my lips, I didn't realize I'd be happy to grant it to her, too.

"I hope she changes her mind," Raven whispers. "All I've ever wanted for you is happiness, Ares. I don't want to be the one who takes it away from you."

"You won't," I promise. "You and I will figure this out, Raven. If we end up getting married, we'll find our own happiness. It might not be easy, but if this is our destiny, it'll work itself out."

The cautious trust I see in her eyes sparks something deep within me. Something that feels an awful lot like hope.

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Chapter Eighteen

RAVEN

Sierra hangs Hannah's wedding dress on the wardrobe door in the bridal room and smiles at it. "You're going to look beautiful in this."

I shake my head and start to pace. "No. She'll be here any minute now. There's no way she'll let Ares marry someone else — especially not *me*."

My best friend stares at me, her expression annoyed. "I don't get it," she tells me. "You've been in love with Ares all your life. Why would you *want* Hannah to show up?"

I pause and look up at her, my heart sinking. "Because he's always been hers, Sierra. Even if he marries me, the one he wants will always be Hannah. It's hard enough to watch him love her the way he does, but legally being able to call him mine while I know that his heart will always belong to her? That would kill me, Sierra. I'd much rather stay friends with him than be the person standing between him and the woman he truly loves. I don't want to be a replacement, a reminder of Hannah. If we get married now, I'll never be able to step out of Hannah's shadow. I'll always be a cheap replica of her, a stand-in."

Sierra shakes her head, her expression thoughtful. "I've always found it so odd, you know? It never made sense to me that someone that shines the way you do feels like they're cast in shadows. She's like the moon, Raven. Beautiful on a lonely night, but cold and distant. You? You're the sun.

You're warmth and happiness, and the centre of all that's good. Similarly, Ares's world will revolve around you if you give him a chance. I know my brother, babe. If you give this marriage an honest chance, he'll make you happy. I've always said this, and I'll say it again: there's *always* been something between Ares and you. Now you can both finally give into it, and it'll be the best thing you'll ever do."

I run a hand through my hair and shake my head. "Sierra," I warn. "Today is not the day for your little pep talks and your romantic heart."

She merely smiles at me and grabs my hand, leading me to the vanity that's been set up for Hannah. "You'll see," she tells me. "This is the start of something new. He'll fall for you, and when he does, I'll tell you *I told you so*."

A knock sounds at my door, and I look up sharply when my favorite makeup artist walks in with three girls in tow. "What are you doing here, Enrique?"

He smiles at me before lifting his gaze to nod at Sierra. "Leave everything to me," he tells her as she places her hands on my shoulders. She squeezes tightly before stepping away, and my gaze follows her through the room. What has she done? She can't truly believe I'll be walking down that aisle, can she?

I watch through the mirror as Sierra leisurely steams Hannah's dress, a smile on her face. Today, more than ever, it's clear just how crazy my bestie is. She should be concerned about Ares and me, but she's barely stopped smiling all morning.

Enrique starts working on my makeup while a hairdresser starts to work on my hair, and nerves finally truly set in. This can't be happening, can it?

I grab my phone and try to ring Hannah again, for the fifty-seventh time today. Hannah disappeared after I left her apartment, and last I heard she'd been spotted on a beach in St. Tropez. I really hope she realized what she did and came to her senses in time. If she doesn't get here within the next hour, she'll make a mistake she can never undo.

"You look beautiful," Enrique tells me as he puts the finishing touches on my makeup. He's done my makeup for every single gala and awards ceremony throughout the last few years, but he's outdone himself today.

For one single moment, I wonder what Ares will think when he sees me, but then I shake my head and mentally berate myself for the thought. Today must be torment for him. Until the moment he sees me at the end of the

aisle, he'll be expecting Hannah. It isn't wonder he'll look at me with. It'll be disappointment and resentment.

I sit up at the sound of a knock on my door, my heart dropping. The door opens, and my mother walks in. I look at her wide-eyed, and she hesitates for a moment before shaking her head. My shoulders deflate as treacherous relief sinks in. She isn't here.

"I'm sorry," Mom says. She glances at Enrique and his crew before pressing her lips together for a moment. "I'm sorry your sister won't be here on such a special day. I'm not sure what's gotten into her, and I hope she won't come to regret this."

"Me too," I murmur. What happens once she realizes she's made a mistake? What if she goes after Ares and begs him for forgiveness? His promise to me is nothing compared to the hundreds of promises they must have made to each other throughout the years. Am I condemning myself by agreeing to this?

Mom walks up to Sierra, and together they hold up Hannah's wedding dress for me, helping me into it carefully. I designed this for her, so it doesn't fit perfectly, but it's not far off. This isn't what I would've created for myself, and it's yet another reminder that I'm merely taking Hannah's place. Everything I'm experiencing today should've been hers, and it sickens me.

"You look gorgeous," Mom says, but she can't quite make herself look me in the eye. "Thank you, sweetheart," she whispers. "I know this isn't easy for you. I'm sorry that it's come to this, but perhaps it is fate, you know? Initially, Ares's fiancee was supposed to be you. Maybe Grandma Anne was right, and this will all work out for the best."

I look at her and clench my jaw. "Is that what you tell yourself to justify the position you've put me in? Is that what you've convinced yourself of to ease your guilty conscience?"

Mom winces and looks down, drawing a shaky breath. "Raven," she whispers. "I… I truly am sorry. If Dad and I hadn't spoiled your sister the way we have, this wouldn't have happened. I wish… I wish I'd treated you better. I wish I hadn't taken you for granted. If I hadn't, then perhaps this moment between us would've been different. It wouldn't diminish your sacrifice in any way, but perhaps I'd have known how to console you, how to encourage you."

I frown at her, confused. Mom has never so much as given me any indication that she was aware of the favoritism, the way she and Dad both ostracized me.

She cups my cheek and nods. “I knew,” she tells me. “Of course I knew how you felt. It’s just that Dad and I felt so guilty toward your sister. She was so sick as a child that she spent years at home, missing school and opportunities to make friends, to just be a kid. I’m sorry, Raven. Perhaps my words mean nothing to you, but I wanted to say it nonetheless. Today, more so than usual, the distance between us pains me. I wish you and I could have been like any mother and daughter the morning before the wedding. I wish that, despite the circumstances, I could’ve been the one you turn to. My eyes are open now, Raven. I see what I’ve done, what my actions have turned your sister into.”

My eyes fill with tears that I blink away rapidly, and I nod briefly, unsure of what to say. Out of everything I expected my mother to say today, this wasn’t it.

Mom grabs my shoulders and smiles at me. “Come on,” she says. “Dad is waiting for you just outside the door.”

I nod and follow her out, my heart uneasy. Once I walk down that aisle, there’s no going back. I pray with all my heart that I don’t come to regret this.

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Chapter Nineteen

ARES

My four brothers stand by my side in the beautiful vineyard Hannah and I chose as our wedding venue. Countless of Hannah's friends are seated in front of me, all of them whispering to each other.

Their invite merely stated that they were jointly invited by the Windsors and the Du Ponts, but no mention was made of a wedding. We did it that way to ensure our wedding couldn't be crashed by paparazzi, but it's worked in our favor in more than one way.

I was meant to announce what they were here for the moment I took my place at the altar, but how can I, when I don't know who the bride will be?

"It's for the best," Lex says, and Luca nods in agreement.

"She might still change her mind," I tell them, but they all shake their heads.

"She won't," Zane replies. "And someday you'll thank her for it."

Dion looks at me, his gaze pointed. "Whatever happens today, Ares, remember that you're a Windsor, and none of us choose our wives. It's a tradition that's served us well for generations, so have some faith, okay?"

I grit my teeth and nod. "I'll be sure to remind you of that when it's your turn." Dion is the only one out of my siblings whose engagement was arranged years ago too. Even from here, I can see his fiancee sitting in the back. I suppose it's different for them, since Dion doesn't live here. As far

as I'm aware, they only see each other when Grandma forces them to meet, and on special occasions such as these. They've never dated, the way Hannah and I have.

Lex sighs and runs a hand through his hair. "Would it really be so bad to marry Raven? How about I take your place?"

I tense, red hot fury rushing through me as I turn to face my brother. He takes in my expression and smirks knowingly.

"What?" Lex asks. "Can't stand the idea of Raven being with anyone else? I thought you didn't want her as your wife?"

"Fuck off," I snap.

The boys all chuckle at my expense, and I turn to face forward, ignoring them. The mere thought of Raven with Lexington pisses me off. I shouldn't feel any possessiveness toward her, but I do.

Music starts to play and the doors swing open. Everything around me fades away as I wait with bated breath. Did she change her mind? Surely Hannah won't throw away years of planning a future together, years of carefully nurturing our love?

I inhale sharply when Raven appears at the end of the aisle, on her father's arm. She pauses mid-step, her eyes finding mine, and I force myself to smile at her.

Raven Du Pont. Never in a million years did I think I'd find her walking toward me, wearing a wedding dress that looks beautiful on her, but that wasn't designed for her. What must it feel like to walk in her sister's shoes? Nothing about today is *hers*, not even the man she's marrying.

Arthur smiles at me despite his grave expression and places Raven's trembling hand in mine. I wrap my fingers around her hand and hold on to her tightly, my eyes trailing over her face. She's shaking, and her gaze is filled with fear and insecurity as the officiant starts the ceremony.

"We are gathered here today to witness the union of Raven Du Pont and Ares Windsor," he says, and we both breathe a sigh of relief.

It hadn't occurred to me to notify him of a change in the bride's name. I can't imagine how humiliating it would've been for both of us if he'd said Hannah's name.

I tighten my grip on Raven's hand and draw circles across the back of it with my thumb, trying my best to ease her nerves somehow. "Raven," I whisper.

She looks up sharply, her eyes meeting mine.

“You look breathtaking.”

Some of the tension in her shoulders eases, and she smiles at me, genuinely this time. I can’t believe I’m marrying *Raven*. She’s my sister’s best friend and my ex’s younger sister. She isn’t supposed to be standing here with me in a wedding dress.

Yet here we are. This is it for us. The Windsors don’t do divorces. How much has she had to sacrifice to be here with me? How much more will this marriage cost us?

The officiant tells us to exchange rings, and I cringe involuntarily. The wedding ring Zane is handing me is one that Hannah chose.

Raven looks up at me with such pain in her eyes as I slide the thin pave diamond ring onto her fingers that I struggle to breathe for a moment. It fits her perfectly, yet it feels so wrong.

Her hands shake as she slides my platinum band onto my finger, and she doesn’t even look me in the eye. It’s clear that everything about today is heartbreaking for her, and there’s nothing I can do to make it better.

“You may now kiss the bride,” the officiant says, and Raven freezes.

I take a step closer to her and gently cup her cheek before dropping my forehead to hers. “This is it,” I whisper. “From this moment forward, you’re my wife. Mine to care for, mine to cherish, and mine to protect. I know this isn’t what you would’ve wanted for yourself, but I swear I’ll give you my all, Raven.”

She pulls away a little to look at me, and then she nods, a small smile on her face. I smirk at her as I lean in, my lips brushing against hers. It was meant to be a chaste kiss, just enough to please the crowd, but the moment my lips touch hers, all my good intentions fall away.

I thread my hand through her long hair and yank her closer, taking her lips with a new sense of desperation. She moans, and I force her lips apart, deepening our kiss. It’s a promise of everything to come. She’s my *wife* now, and I have every intention of treating her as such. This kiss is a vow, it’s reassurance. From this day forward, I’m hers. It isn’t what I wanted, but we’ll make the best of it.

Her cheeks are flushed and her lipstick is smeared when I pull away, and I can’t help but smile at her disarmed expression, a hint of lust hiding in her beautiful hazel eyes.

“Mr. and Mrs. Windsor, everyone!” the officiant says, and we turn to face the cheering crowd.

Grandma nods at us in satisfaction, but neither of Raven's parents can bear facing her. I'm not surprised. They sacrificed her happiness in favor of their company. For years, they neglected her, and now this? They owe her everything.

"Come on," I tell her. "The quicker we can finalize the formalities, the quicker we can get out of here."

I don't want her spending a second longer than necessary in a dress that isn't hers, reenacting the wedding of her sister's dreams.

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Chapter Twenty

ARES

"Congratulations," one of the actresses under my management says. Jessica, I believe her name is? "When I got the invite, I assumed it'd be something like this, but for some reason, I thought it'd be Hannah and you. I always thought there was secretly something going on between you two, but it all makes sense now. You were just looking out for your sister-in-law."

My heart clenches painfully at the thought of Hannah being my *sister-in-law*, yet that is exactly what she is now. I force a smile to my face, and Raven tenses beside me. "The Du Ponts and the Windsors have always been good friends," I tell her, unsure what else to say.

She glances at Raven and grins. "I guess this explains why there haven't been any rumors about you in a while. You were secretly dating Ares."

I tighten my grip on Raven's waist and pull her closer. "Yes," Raven says. "Ares and I are both very private people, so we've tried our best to stay out of the spotlight, and we'll continue to do so."

I nod and press a soft kiss to her temple, tired of this fucking charade. It's been an endless barrage of questions that neither of us has answers to, and I'm exhausted. I'm sure Raven is too.

She slumps against me once Jessica walks away, and I pull her closer with a big fake smile on my face. "Let's get the fuck out of here," I tell her.

She grins at me so cheerfully that even I'm deceived for a moment. "Gladly," she snaps, smiling brightly.

I chuckle. I can't help it. "This is fucking ridiculous, but let's put on our last act of the night," I tell her, before bending down and lifting her into my arms. Cheers erupt around us as I carry her away, both of us smiling the way that's expected of us.

There's a limousine waiting for us, and I carefully put Raven down in front of it. The relieved sigh that escapes her lips grates on me. I suppose a small part of me wishes that she didn't hate every second of today, of marrying me.

I hold the door open for her, and she freezes for a moment before getting in. It isn't until I join her that I understand her reaction. Grandma is sitting in the car, her arms crossed and a deceptively serene smile on her face.

"Raven *Windsor*," she says. "Welcome to the family."

Raven tenses and nods. She's smiling the way she did throughout the day, but I notice the way her hands tremble.

"Why are you here, Grandma?" I ask, weary. Today has been a complete mess, and I'm not sure how much more I can take.

"Everything went as I expected today, but I understand that both of you are confused and uncertain about your future, so I'd like to take the time to ensure you're familiar with the rules you must abide by throughout the first three years of your marriage." She looks at me then. "You might be aware, but Raven is not."

"I can—"

"No," she cuts me off. "It's best that I explain this myself, and it's best for both of you to go into this knowing what is expected of you."

I sigh and glance at Raven, my heart aching. I can't imagine how hard today must be for her, and the last thing I want for her is to be overwhelmed with restrictions and rules.

"Raven," Grandma says, her voice soft and tender. "In order for Ares to inherit his shares and for you to inherit your parents' stake in the company we'll be merging, there are a few rules you must abide by. I'm not sure how much you know already, so I'll explain everything, okay?"

She nods hesitantly.

"One. Ares and you may not spend more than three consecutive nights apart."

Raven tenses and wraps her arms around herself, looking uncomfortable. I hadn't given much thought to anything beyond today, and the idea of us sharing a room seems… strange. I can't even imagine what that might be like. While I care for her deeply, we've never spent more than a few hours together, and rarely completely alone.

"Two. When you're together, you must share a bed. You cannot live separate lives, nor can you have separate bedrooms."

I see the way Raven tenses, and I wonder if she's trying to think of ways around Grandma's rules. I suppose she's about to find out the hard way that grandma is not to be trifled with.

"Three. You must remain married for three years. If, after that time, you decide you truly aren't well-suited, you can get a divorce without penalty. However, there has never been a divorce in the Windsor family, and I have full faith that your marriage will not be an exception."

Raven glances at me, her gaze unreadable. I always said that I'd never get a divorce, but that was with Hannah. With Raven? I'm not so sure. Perhaps a divorce is the solution to all our problems.

"Four. You must remain faithful to each other. If either of you cheats on the other, you both lose everything. You'll lose your parents' company, and Ares will lose his inheritance. Family is at the core of everything we are, everything we've built. And *your* family? It starts with each other."

Raven nods, a hint of reluctance in her expression. Surely she didn't think I'd allow her to fuck around while she carries my name? I clench my jaw and look away. Everything about this marriage is a clusterfuck.

"The fifth and final rule is that you must give your marriage an honest chance. Be open to this working out for both of you."

Grandma looks between the two of us, a sweet smile on her face. It's odd how genuinely sweet she looks while she's got both of our lives in an iron grip. "Don't cling to the lives you had before marriage. Give each other an honest chance, and in three years, I'll sign the paperwork declaring the company jointly yours, making the two of you the owners of this country's largest media company. You'll be handed your inheritance too, Ares." She pauses, her gaze moving between the both of us. "I know this is all very sudden, so for the next four weeks, I will relieve you from all family obligations. You won't need to attend family dinners or charity events. All I want you to do for now is focus on your marriage. Spend time together, get to know each other on a different level. Soon, the entire world will find out

about you, and the pressure will add some additional strain to your marriage. Spend some quality time together before all that weighs you down."

Raven and I both nod, though neither of us does it with conviction. I can't help but wonder what she's thinking. I have no idea what a marriage between us would look like, and I'm not sure what she wants, what she expects. I don't know where I stand with Hannah, either. Everything is a fucking mess, and Raven is caught in the middle of it.

"Carry your bride in the way you should," Grandma orders when the car stops in front of my home.

I nod obediently and step out of the car, my eyes locking with Raven's as I bend down and reach for her. She looks reluctant and scared, and I hate that I've put that look in her eyes. I hate that she was forced to do this at all.

I wrap one arm around her waist and the other underneath her knees as I lift her into my arms. Raven gasps, her arms finding their way around my neck.

"Ares!" She looks at me, and the expression in her beautiful hazel eyes stops me in my tracks. "You don't have to do this." She sounds hurt, broken. Today might be hard on me, but it's just as hard on her. We both lost a lot today.

"You heard Grandma," I tell her, my voice soft. "Besides, the staff will all be watching us."

As if on cue, Donna, my housekeeper, appears at the door. She keeps her gaze trained on the floor, but her curiosity is palpable. Our household staff was all expecting Hannah. I know they won't say a word about it, but it still feels unsettling.

I carry Raven into the house, my heart aching as I walk toward the living room with her in my arms. I can feel her gaze on me, but I can't bear facing her. She has no idea how many times I've imagined carrying in her sister this way… but if I want to do right by her, I need to ensure she's never reminded of that.

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Chapter Twenty-One

ARES

I can feel Raven's gaze on me as I carry her into the living room, but I don't know how to face her. If not for me, she wouldn't be in this situation. I should've tried harder to convince Hannah. I should've gone after her when I was notified that she left the country. Instead, I sat back and watched our lives go up in flames, making Raven pay the ultimate price.

"I need a drink," I tell Raven the moment I put her down. I turn away from her and walk toward my liquor cabinet, pouring myself a whiskey neat.

"Make that two," she says as she sits down on the sofa.

Her hands tremble as she takes the glass from me, and I tear my gaze away, throwing my drink back before instantly refilling it. For some reason, I'm reminded of the way I kissed her today, the way she kissed me *back*.

"I'm sorry," I tell her as I sit down opposite her, a safe distance away from her. She looks so beautiful tonight, in that wedding dress she was never meant to wear.

"For what?"

I force myself to look her in the eye and take a deep breath. She's my wife now, but what does that mean for us?

"For kissing you."

Raven leans back against the sofa and takes another sip of her drink. “I would’ve been embarrassed if you hadn’t. Not that many people knew about Hannah and you, and the few who do are tied to an NDA. Most of our guests assumed our wedding was real, and thankfully, we’ve been able to make it *look* real too.”

I nod at her, unsure of what to say. It’s never been awkward between Raven and me. We’ve always been comfortable with each other, even when we’re sitting together in silence. Somehow, everything feels different now. We both lost a lot today, and I’m starting to fear that in some ways, we lost each other too.

“We should probably talk about… *us*,” I say.

Raven tenses, her spine straightening. “Yes. We should.”

I run a hand through my hair and stare up at the ceiling for a moment. “I’m sorry it came to this, Raven. The thought of me being the reason you don’t get to live the life you envisioned for yourself, *fuck*. I’m so fucking sorry.”

“Ares.” Her voice is soft but firm, and I sit up straight to face her. “This isn’t your fault. I admit that I also didn’t think Hannah truly wouldn’t show up, but it’s done now. We’re married.”

Married. Fuck. This is a complete fucking shitshow. How the fuck did I end up married to my fiancee’s younger sister? What the fuck? I take a calming breath before tipping my drink back. I need some fucking liquid courage for this shit.

“Raven, I want you to know that I don’t expect anything from you. All I ask is that we make it look like we’re giving our marriage an honest chance — in Grandma’s eyes, at least.”

“*In Grandma’s eyes*,” she repeats, her gaze roaming over my face. “What does that mean?”

I pull my bowtie loose and unbutton the top button on my shirt. “It means we only have to fake it in her presence. So long as she thinks we’re trying our best to be together, she’ll leave us alone. I’m the first of my siblings to get married, so I’m not entirely sure what to expect either, but I know my grandmother. If she thinks we aren’t trying, she’ll come up with all kinds of schemes, and we can’t have that. You only know Grandma as the sweet old lady she pretends to be in front of you, but she’s hard to deal with. I love her, but she can be a true nightmare.”

Raven rises to her feet, looking like a complete vision in her white wedding dress. All day I've tried my hardest not to stare at her, but it's impossible to resist. She looks stunning, and the deep V at the front of her dress showcases her cleavage beautifully. It feels inappropriate to look at her a second too long, but I struggle to tear my gaze away. It's strange that this beautiful woman is now *my wife*.

"So you want to pretend we're making our marriage work, and what will you be doing in the meantime?"

She walks up to me and rests her knee on the sofa, between my legs. Then she leans in and places her hands on my shoulders. It takes all of me to keep her from finding out how fucking mesmerized I am.

"Do you intend to fuck my sister while you make me fulfill the terms of our marriage?"

I tense and grit my teeth, surprised by the question and the venom in her voice. "Of course not," I snap. "Just what do you think of me, Raven?"

She tightens her grip on my shoulders, anger flashing through her eyes. I've never seen her look so furious. The Raven I used to know was always sweet and patient, but the woman in front of me is something else entirely.

"I don't know, Ares. It sounds an awful lot like you're asking me to pretend to be your wife for three years, until you can divorce me and go back to my sister. It's all super convenient for you two, isn't it? Hannah runs away, so she doesn't have to suffer through the limitations this marriage would impose on her career, and for the next three years, she gets to focus on her acting career while *I'm* trapped in this marriage with you. Are you really going to take three years of my life and sacrifice them for Hannah?"

I take a moment to just look at my wife. She's hurt, insecure, and angry. Justifiably so. I'm not sure what I was asking her for, but I do realize I chose the wrong words.

I reach for her and wrap my hands around her waist, startling her. "No," I tell her. "No. I won't sacrifice three years of your life, Raven. What I'm saying is that there are rules we need to abide by, and faking it in front of Grandma will make both of our lives easier." I inhale deeply, my mind a complete fucking mess. "I'm not sure what this marriage will be like for us. I'm not sure where I stand with Hannah, either. Right now, there's a lot I don't know, Rave."

Raven nods and pulls away, her shoulders drooping. Today has been a hard day for both of us, and at least for a little while, things won't get easier.

"We don't need to figure everything out at once. We can take our time, okay?" I tell her. "How about I show you around, and we just get an early night?"

She nods, and I force a smile onto my face. Raven and I have always been so comfortable with each other, but right now, we're both pretending we aren't hurting. Everything about today kills me. She just became my wife, yet the distance between us has never been greater.

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Chapter Twenty-Two

RAVEN

I'm in a daze as Ares shows around. Until today, I'd only ever seen his living room and kitchen. His home is very similar in size to Sierra's, but his layout is entirely different. Sierra's is mostly open plan, while Ares seems to have a lot of different types of rooms.

I can see my sister's influence all over the place, and it feels strange. It makes it even more obvious that everything here was meant to be Hannah's. I suppose in many ways, it all still is. *He* still is.

Even the cinema room he's got was no doubt built to watch private screenings of Hannah's movies. The love he has for her is evident in every nook and cranny of the place I'll be forced to call home.

"I like my privacy, so I don't enjoy having staff around. My housekeeper and chef come in during the day, when I'm at work, so they won't really bother you. You won't see them at all. I'll show you how to download the app the entire family uses later. You may have seen Sierra use it before. If you need anything at all, just send a request through the app and it'll get done, whether it be groceries or painting the walls. We have an entire team of butlers that know how to get nearly anything done."

I nod as I follow along. "This is the last room. It's my bedroom," he says. "I suppose it's *ours* now, actually."

He holds the door open for me, and I follow him in reluctantly, my stomach twisting. It's clear that he shares a lot of memories with Hannah in this place, and that'll be even more the case in his bedroom.

Ares runs a hand through his hair and inhales deeply, his gaze roaming over the room he thought he'd share with my sister.

I've never been in his bedroom before, and just standing here feels like an invasion of privacy. Ares hesitantly turns toward me, his gaze apologetic. "Your suitcases were delivered earlier today. You should find everything you need in the dressing room. Let me show you."

I nod and follow him, pausing at the sight of the vanity filled with my sister's favorite products. A dull ache spreads from my heart, and I wrap my arms around myself protectively. For years, this is the room he shared with Hannah. This is where she'd stay when she came over, and from what I can see, that was quite often.

Ares follows my gaze and freezes. "I…" He cups the back of his neck, his gaze contrite. "I wasn't thinking, Raven. It was all so sudden. Until this morning, I was hoping… I haven't had a chance—"

I shake my head and place my hand on his arm. "It's okay," I tell him, steeling myself before I look up at him. "But you should know that I don't want her hand-me-downs. I don't want to be surrounded by the remains of your relationship with her. Our marriage might not be a conventional one, but I'd still like to ask you for a basic level of respect. I won't live in her shadow throughout our entire marriage."

"Of course," he says, his voice soft. "I understand. I'm sorry. I'll have her things packed up and delivered to her. How about that?"

I nod and look away, my heart aching. I wish I could tell him the full truth — that I don't want to be reminded of how much he loves her, of the life he expected to build with her. I wish I could tell him to look at me and truly see me, just *once*.

Instead, I inhale shakily and walk toward the mirror, pausing in front of it. "I'm exhausted, and I honestly just want to go to bed." I don't have it in me to keep up the facade. "Can you help me with the buttons on the back?"

Ares walks up to me and stands behind me, his eyes on mine through the mirror. His touch is gentle as he pushes my hair over my shoulder, exposing the long row of buttons on my wedding dress. Even the dress I'm wearing tonight isn't mine. I designed this for Hannah. It's almost as though I'm stealing everything that used to be hers, and it doesn't feel right.

Ares hesitates for a moment before unbuttoning the top button on my dress, a tormented expression on his face. He is no doubt thinking of Hannah, and how amazing she would have looked in this. What expression would he be wearing if it was Hannah standing in front of him tonight?

He pauses halfway through and looks up, his eyes meeting mine in the mirror. “How far do you want me to unbutton this?”

I force a smile onto my face and try my hardest to pretend that my heart isn’t racing, that I’m not affected by his touch. What does he see when he looks at me? Does a small part of him find me attractive at all?

“All the way,” I murmur. “The fabric is quite delicate, so I don’t want to damage it by trying to undo the buttons myself.”

He nods and tears his gaze away, refocusing on his task. Doesn’t he feel a single thing as he undresses me? The way he kissed me during the ceremony allowed me to pretend that our wedding wasn’t a farce, but the coldness he treated me with afterward took away any hope he’d inadvertently given me.

A shiver runs down my spine as his fingers brush against my skin, and I let my eyes fall closed for a moment, pretending tonight isn’t pure torment for him. In my fantasies, Ares wants me as much as I want him, his thoughts filled with nothing but me.

If things had been different between us, would he have laid me down on his bed, his touch impatient and heated? Instead of the carefulness he’s handling me with, would he be rough and frantic, the way he was so many years ago?

Ares takes his time unbuttoning my dress, until the back falls open. I expected him to step away, but instead he wraps his hands around my shoulders. I glance at him through the mirror to find him looking at me in a way he never has before. His eyes meet mine, and for a single second, I could’ve sworn I saw lust in them. What would he do if I turned around now and kissed him? I’m terrified of what might happen once Hannah realizes that I truly married Ares in her stead. The moment she comes back and asks for his forgiveness, my chance of making this marriage work will be gone.

I twirl around and place my hands against his chest, a fear I’ve never felt before dictating my moves. “Ares,” I whisper.

It’s almost as though my voice makes him snap out of the daze he was in, because he takes a step away from me and runs a hand through his hair.

“Go to bed without me,” he says, his voice firm.

I nod, my thoughts whirling as he walks away. I suppose he’s trying to give me privacy, but that isn’t what I want.

I once told one of my close friends that if I ever thought I had a chance with the man I love, I’d give it my all, and I’d fight dirty if I have to. This is it. This is my chance.

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Chapter Twenty-Three

RAVEN

The sound of knocking wakes me, and I blink, disoriented, my gaze dropping to Ares next to me. I didn't think we'd ever find ourselves in this position… waking up together, *married*.

Another knock sounds on the door, and I sit up, letting the sheets bunch around my waist. "Ares," I murmur.

"Hmm?" He blinks lazily and turns toward me, sighing as his eyes flutter open. "Raven," he whispers dreamily. His eyes leisurely roam over the black lace nightie I'm wearing, lingering on my breasts for a moment. He didn't come to bed until I fell asleep, and I wasn't sure he'd be next to me this morning at all. It wouldn't have surprised me if he spent the night on the sofa. It can't have been easy for him to have me in his bed when it's my sister he wants.

"Ares, sweetheart," Donna calls. "There's… there's someone at the entrance."

I tense and let my eyes fall closed. "Hannah," I whisper. Guilt hits me hard, followed by intense shame. "What are we going to tell her?" I ask, my voice trembling.

Ares sits up and turns toward me, exposing the blue checkered pajamas he's wearing. Hannah has matching ones. The mere sight of him makes me

feel sick to my stomach. Did he wear them because he misses her, or is she so deeply entrenched in his life that he can't detangle everything they were?

Ares stares at me for a moment, no doubt noting my anxiety. "What do you want me to say to her?"

I look down at my hands and inhale deeply before speaking. "I want you to tell her what you told me at the altar. You told me you'd give me your all, Ares. I'm asking you to keep that promise. I know how much you love her, but I won't let you cheat on me — nor will I let you embarrass me. I demand the respect I'm due as your wife, the respect you would've shown Hannah if she hadn't left you at the altar yesterday."

He looks away and nods sharply. "Understood," he simply says. I look up in surprise to find him smiling at me reassuringly, as though he can read the fears I try so hard to hide.

"Let's get ready," he tells me. "She'll want to speak to both of us, I'm sure. I'll leave you to use our ensuite bathroom, and I'll head over to the bathroom in our gym."

I nod and slip out of bed, a thousand different worries running through my mind. I don't want to see them together. Somehow, I've been existing in this fictional world that Hannah isn't part of. I've been convincing myself that I could outrun her, and that I'd get away with taking her place.

I knew I couldn't run forever.

I'm surprised to find Ares sitting on his bed when I walk out of the dressing room, a towel pressed to his wet hair. I thought he'd have gone to speak to Hannah in private, yet here he is, waiting for me.

His eyes roam over the dress I'm wearing, and then he looks away. "Ready?" he asks as he stands up.

I shake my head. "No," I admit. I know what my sister is like. She's always been a talented actress, and not even I can withstand her skills. I'm scared that my resolve will crumble once I come eye to eye with her.

Ares smiles at me, but it doesn't reach his eyes. "It'll be okay. Let's go."

I nod and follow him into the living room, where Hannah is waiting. She jumps up from her seat and rushes up to Ares, throwing herself into his arms. He hugs her tightly, his eyes falling closed as pure torment takes over his expression. It's obvious how much he's missed her, and I've never felt more like an intruder than I do at this moment.

"Tell me it isn't true," she begs, her voice shaking.

“I’m sorry, Hannah.” He sounds as hurt as she does, and it kills me to know I’m all that’s standing between them now.

She pushes away from him as a tear drops down her cheek and glances at me. “Raven, this is some kind of sick joke, right? Please tell me it is.” She laughs humorlessly, the sound carrying a hint of desperation.

I shake my head, remorse washing over me. She loves him. Hannah might be selfish, but her love for Ares has always been one of the most beautiful things about her.

“How could you marry my fiancé?” she asks in disbelief. “How could you possibly agree to marry someone who will never love you? Why would you do this to me, Raven? If you’d just walked away, they’d have postponed the wedding and they wouldn’t have been able to blame Ares for it.”

“Hannah,” I say, my tone defensive. “I called you over a hundred times. I sent you text messages, left you voice notes, and I even emailed you. I tried to contact you in every single way I could think of, but you *chose* to ignore me. I told you that Dad threatened to pull all funding for my company if I didn’t walk down that aisle, and you still didn’t show up. You were willing to risk your future, but that doesn’t mean I was willing to risk *mine*.”

She looks between us, her eyes filled with tears. “Ares,” she says, her voice shaky. “How could you? She’s my *sister*, for God’s sake. This…” She looks between us, insecurity flashing through her eyes. “You two… are you…”

“No,” Ares says instantly. “*Never*. I’ve never loved anyone but you, Hannah. I never will. How could I possibly want someone other than you?”

My heart twists painfully, but I force myself to keep my expression blank. Part of me is terrified that it’s true, and no matter what I do, he’ll never love me. A larger part of me knows that I’ll always regret it if I don’t try.

“Where does this leave us, Ares? What about *us*?”

Ares looks at me, but I’m not sure how to answer her question, either. If anything, I’m waiting for his answer as much as she is.

“You know how I feel about marriage, Hannah. You chose to walk away from this, from us.”

She looks at him in disbelief. “You only have to remain married for three years, right?”

He hesitates for a moment, but then he nods.

“I’ll wait. I’ll wait for you, Ares.”

I take in his expression, the spark of hope that lights up his whole face. It hurts. It kills me that he so desperately wants to be with her, even now.

“Three years will fly by,” she says, her tone desperate. “I’ll focus on my career for the next three years, and once you two get a divorce, I’ll retire and marry you. I see it now, Ares. I don’t need my career as much as I need you. I’d never have walked away if I thought they’d make you marry Raven.”

She turns to me then, her eyes filled with sorrow. “I’m so sorry, Rave. This… it’s all my fault. Having to marry your brother-in-law… I can’t imagine how hard this must be for you. I know it’s too late for apologies, but I truly am sorry. I’ll set this right, I swear. I know three years seems like a lot, but you’ll walk away with Mom and Dad’s company.”

Brother-in-law. Part of me wants to snap at her and tell her that he’s *my husband* now, and *her* brother-in-law, but I don’t have it in me to hurt her that way. Instead, I nod, unsure how to respond. I might be Ares’s wife, but I have no rights to him. Standing here in front of my sister, the woman he loves and wants to spend his life with… I can’t hurt her any more than she’s already hurting.

Hannah inhales deeply and looks at Ares before turning to me. “I trust both of you,” she says, her gaze drifting between us. She smiles at Ares, her gaze filled with longing. “I know you’ve been put in a difficult situation, but I won’t doubt the love between us, Ares. We’ve been together for five years. In the grand scheme of things, three years is nothing — not compared to the rest of our lives.”

She turns to me then, a pleading look in her eyes. “Had it been anyone else, I’d have been insecure and scared, but I know you’ll never hurt me. You would never betray me in that way, and I know you’ll never see Ares as your husband, no matter what label the world is forcing you two to wear.”

I nod, giving in. This isn’t a battle worth fighting. Besides, Ares might be my husband for now, but he’ll end up being hers in the future. I can see it in his eyes. Even now, it’s her he’s imagining a future with. The promises he made me crumbled the second he laid eyes on her. They always have.

Hannah hesitates, her eyes on mine, and for a moment I wonder if she’s seeing straight through me, if she can sense my reluctance, my heartbreak. “Raven,” she says, her voice tense. My heart starts to race as I force a smile

on my face. Just before she's about to speak again, her phone rings, saving me from questions I might not have an answer to.

Hannah glances at her phone and grimaces. "I need to go," she says reluctantly. "I'm supposed to be on set today."

Ares tenses, hearing the words she isn't saying. If she's expected to be on set, then she must have known long ago that she wouldn't be on her honeymoon today. What kind of game is she playing, and how long is Ares going to let her get away with it?

I watch as Hannah walks up to him. She rises to her tiptoes to kiss him, and I grit my teeth, pure venom rushing through my veins. Ares averts his face at the last minute, making her lips brush against his cheek instead.

She narrows her eyes at him, but in the end, she chooses to remain quiet. "I'll see you later," she tells him, her voice soft. "Let's have dinner and talk things through, okay?"

He nods and watches her as she walks away, leaving both of our futures in disarray. The door closes behind her, and Ares inhales deeply as he takes a seat on the sofa, his gaze unfocused.

I should give him space, and I should respect his boundaries, but I won't. This is war, and I won't go down without a fight.

My steps are filled with confidence as I walk toward him and place my knee on the sofa between his spread legs, leaning in the way I did yesterday. The regret with which he looks at me has me hesitating, but in the end, hope wins.

I place my hands on his shoulders as I lean against him, towering above him. "My words still stand," I tell him, my voice soft but firm. "I won't let you cheat on me. If you want to be with Hannah once our three years are up, then so be it. But until then, I need you to be faithful to me. You might think that you can sneak around and won't get caught, but that isn't a risk that's worth taking. If you cheat on me, I stand to lose as much as you do. I won't let it happen."

He wraps his hands around my waist, his gaze filled with emotions I can't read. He's never looked at me this way before. "I hear you," he says, his voice soft. "I won't break my vows, Raven. I won't lie to you and tell you that I'm not tempted, because I am. It would be so easy to pretend that you and I aren't married at all — that we're just roommates, that you're still just my fiancee's little sister. But I won't."

I exhale shakily and nod at him, relief washing over me. This is as much as I'll ask for. So long as he's faithful to me, I've got a chance.

One chance is all I need.

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Chapter Twenty-Four

ARES

I straighten my tie absentmindedly as I stand in front of the mirror, feeling conflicted. I had that same dream about Raven again last night, and it really fucked with me. Usually I'd shake it off and remind myself that I can't control my subconsciousness, but I haven't been able to get it off my mind all day, and I'm feeling so fucking guilty. Especially because I didn't instantly realise I was no longer dreaming when I saw her in my bed. I'd been so close to pulling her on top of me, my cock still throbbing.

Seeing Hannah made me feel even worse.

I've loved her for as long as I can remember, yet now I'm married to her sister. It feels like I've betrayed her in the worst way, and the last thing I want to do is lust after Raven too. It's fucking insane. Within the span of a few days, my entire life derailed.

"Where are you going?"

I tense at the sound of Raven's voice and look up, my eyes meeting hers in the mirror. She's leaning against the wall next to the door, her arms crossed. Just looking at her has me feeling conflicted. She looks beautiful in that long silk robe she's wearing, her long hair draped over her chest. It's odd to have her in my home. She fits in so perfectly, yet having her around is disorienting.

I watch as she pushes away from the wall and walks toward me, her hips swaying. I've managed to avoid her for most of the day, locking myself up in my home office instead, but I should've known I couldn't keep it up.

I turn around to face her and force a smile. "Dinner."

Raven pauses in front of me and grabs my tie, pulling it loose. "Is that so? With who?"

My heart starts to race as a different sense of guilt washes over me. Guilt toward Raven this time. "Rave," I say, my voice soft. She knows exactly who I'm meeting for dinner. She was there this morning, when Hannah asked to have dinner together and talk things through.

She lets my tie fall to the floor and grabs my collar, her movements betraying her anger. "I hate this shirt," she murmurs as her fingers brush over the top button on my shirt.

I swallow hard as Raven slowly unbuttons the blue shirt Hannah once bought me. I watch her carefully as more and more of my shirt falls open, unsure what to do or say. She's never touched me in this way before, yet it feels so right. The possessiveness in her eyes, her touch. This is new territory for me.

"Rave," I whisper. "What are you doing?" She's clearly angry, and I don't want to provoke her any further.

She clenches her jaw and looks at me, her eyes flashing. "Undressing my *husband*. What are *you* doing?"

I tense and wrap my hands around her wrists, keeping them in place. "It's just dinner."

"Is it?"

I nod. "Raven… I swear, I'll keep my promise. Despite my past with Hannah and my feelings for her, I won't cheat on you."

I tighten my grip on her wrists, and she looks up at me. "Ares," she sighs. "I don't want to make you unhappy. Hannah made it sound like it's nothing, but three years is a long time. I don't really know what to do. I'll be honest with you, I don't share well, and I can be quite jealous. The moment you and I got married, you became *mine*. I refuse to be made a fool of, and I won't let you two sacrifice me for your own selfish goals. I won't be your front while you screw my sister behind my back. I don't know what our marriage will look like, and I'm well aware that you're in love with her, but you're insane if you think I'm going to stand back and watch you date her." She pulls her wrists out of my grip and takes a step back. "I want you

to be happy, Ares… but not with her. Not like that. Not after what you've both asked of me."

I smile at her, intrigued. Raven has always been so sweet and calm, and I'm starting to wonder if I ever truly knew her at all. In the last couple of weeks, she's been different, and I think I like the change. I lean in and brush her hair out of her face. "I hear you, Rave. I do. This is confusing for me too, but you're right. I'm yours… and you? You're mine. It's going to take us some time to navigate this marriage, but I can promise you this much: I won't ever betray you, nor will I knowingly hurt you."

She nods and turns away, some of her anger draining away. I watch her as her fingers brush over the shirts in my closet. She picks a white one and takes it off the hanger. "And Raven?" I tell her. "I don't share *at all*. If you're asking me to keep my distance from Hannah, you better be keeping your distance from other men, too."

She turns back around to face me, her eyes finding mine. "I'm yours," she says, and my heart skips a beat. "Only yours." There's something about the way she looks at me that reminds me of the dream I had, and the mere memory of it has my cock hardening. I tear my gaze away and take a deep breath. I'm so fucking conflicted. She's my *wife*, yet thinking of her in that way fills me with guilt.

Raven walks up to me and hands me my white shirt. I expected her to walk away, but instead, she grabs the lapels of the shirt I'm wearing and pushes it over my shoulders. Fuck. She's so fucking close, and though I shouldn't, I wonder how she'd respond if I kissed her.

"I'll do it," I tell her, pulling away. Having her hands on me feels too intimate. It's too much. Other than that night she and Sierra got drunk, she's always kept an appropriate distance from me, so I'm uncertain how to handle this new version of her.

Raven watches me as I change into the shirt she chose for me. "Don't let me down," she says, her voice so soft I barely missed it.

I look up sharply, my eyes meeting her vulnerable gaze. "I won't," I promise her. Neither of us knows how to navigate this marriage, but this much I can do. I'll keep my promises to her.

Raven nods, her gaze following me as I walk out.

All I can think about as I make my way to the restaurant I'm meeting Hannah at is the way she just looked at me. Raven looked so hurt, so disappointed.

I’m not sure what to make of it. She and I… I’m not sure what the future holds for us, but I’m starting to wonder what the next three years will be like. I thought she’d want to keep her distance, that she’d push me toward Hannah, but the way she just touched me… it was intimate in a way I didn’t expect.

“Ares!”

I look up when Hannah rushes toward me the moment I step into the private dining room she arranged. She wraps her arms around my neck and rises to her tiptoes, her lips brushing against mine for a split second before I manage to push her away. “*Don’t,*” I snap, wiping my lips with the back of my hand.

Confusion flickers through her eyes. “Ares… please don’t be mad at me.”

I walk past her and take a seat, not bothering to pull out her chair for her like I usually would. Hannah stares at me for a moment before joining me at the table.

“Ares…”

“Where were you?” I ask her. “On our wedding day, where were you?”

She looks away and wraps her arms around herself, her eyes filling with tears. “I genuinely didn’t think they’d make Raven do this,” she says, her voice trembling. “I’d just landed my dream role, and I was just trying to stall. I thought this would be the only way to do it. So long as you weren’t involved, your grandmother wouldn’t punish you for my actions.”

I lean back in my seat and stare at her. I’ve loved her for so many years, but I’m starting to wonder if that’s only because we forced this relationship. “You gambled, and you lost, Hannah.”

She smiles at me and tilts her face. “It was unexpected, but Raven won’t mind getting a divorce in three years. This only slightly derailed our plans. Raven and you used to hang out every once in a while, so there’s no reason we can’t do the same. No one needs to know.”

I cross my arms and smile humorlessly. “Are you asking me to cheat on my wife with you? You want to be my mistress, Han?”

Her eyes flash with anger. “She isn’t really your wife,” she snaps. “Besides, it’s not like Raven will mind. Or are you planning to remain celibate for three years?”

My thoughts involuntarily turn back to the dream I had last night. No, there’s no way I’m staying celibate. “Hannah. You’ve always known that

marriage is sacred in the Windsor family, and I'm no exception. I won't cheat on my wife, regardless of who she is. I'll treat her with the respect she deserves. You chose to walk away from us, and Raven and I were left to deal with the consequences."

"I messed up, Ares. I know I did… but this… you and I have been together for as long as I can remember. I don't understand. Are you seriously telling me you want to be with my *sister* in that way?"

I run a hand through my hair. "No," I tell her. "I'm telling you that you can't have your cake and eat it, too. You made your choice, so you'll live with the consequences. Maybe, you and I can be together in three years, or maybe we'll realize that our relationship was over long before you walked away. I honestly don't know, Han. What I do know is that I'm done humoring you."

"Ares, what does that even mean?"

"It means that we're over. The moment I married Raven, you became my sister-in-law, whether you like it or not."

She stares at me, wide-eyed. "Ares, I know you're mad, but don't do this."

I shake my head. "I *didn't* do this, Hannah. *You* did."

She reaches for my hand and entwines our fingers. "Ares, I don't want to lose you. Please, give me a chance to make this right. Please, honey. This… can't you see how insane this all is? I can't lose you. I don't even know who I am without you."

I smile tightly. "We can try being friends, Han, but that's the best I can do."

"Friends?" she asks, confused. "How could you and I possibly be friends?"

Yeah, how could we? After everything we've been through, how do we find a way to stay in each other's lives without hurting each other, without hurting Raven?

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Chapter Twenty-Five

RAVEN

Sierra's door swings open moments after I press my finger to the scanner, and I walk in with my arms overflowing with snacks.

"Raven?" She sits up on the sofa and puts her laptop away, a frown on her face. "What are you doing here? Shouldn't you be all loved up with Ares?"

I huff as I sink down on the sofa, and she holds her arms open for me, offering me a hug. I throw myself into her arms and squeeze tightly, not sure what to say to her.

"That bad, huh?"

I nod and tighten my grip on her. "He's with her right now."

Sierra pulls me off her to look me in the eye. "He's *what*?"

"He's having dinner with her tonight."

"You must be kidding," she says, her voice terse. "He went for dinner with her a day after you two got married? What the hell? Where are they?"

"Don't," I warn her. "Don't be crazy today. I'm here because I didn't want to be alone in the *Hannah Shrine* he calls his home. Can we just watch some stupid reality TV show and eat snacks that I shouldn't be eating at all?"

Sierra narrows her eyes before she grabs my bag of chips and throws it across the room. "Now is *not* the time for snacks, Raven. You spent years

loving my brother quietly. You're his *wife* now, Rave. In the Windsor family, that actually means something. All we need to do is make sure Grandma finds out where he is right now, and I can guarantee he'll *never* even *attempt* to see her again. You're Grandma's eldest daughter-in-law, and there's no way she'll allow Ares to mistreat you in any way."

I hesitate for a moment, wanting to choose the easy road but knowing it isn't the right thing to do. "Sierra." I shake my head. "Let's not do that, okay? Forcibly keeping him away from her won't work in my best interests. He'll just want to be with her that much more, and the last thing I need is for him to go behind my back."

Sierra purses her lips but manages to bite her tongue. "Come with me."

I sigh as I follow her into her bedroom. I can tell by her terse posture that she's concocting some kind of plan, and I'm not sure I should get caught up in any of her nefarious ideas.

"Here." She holds up a department store bag. "I bought this for you earlier today. I had a feeling you'd be needing it."

I peek inside the bag, my eyes widening when I realize what I'm looking at. I pull the lacy sleepwear out and chuckle. "This is… this is outrageous." I burst out laughing as I stare at the scraps of fabric in my hands. "I've done a lot of underwear modeling and this is ridiculous even for me." I reach into the bag and hold up one of the thongs she bought me. "What's the point of this even? It doesn't have a crotch."

Sierra wiggles her eyebrows. "Easy access." She takes the bag from me and rummages through it, taking out two nightgowns she bought me, one white and the other red. "These are both going to look beautiful on you. They're revealing enough to make it impossible for Ares not to notice your body."

I bite down on my lip as I reach for the red nightgown. "I'm not sure," I tell her. Hannah and I have very different body types. She's a little shorter than I am, and when she isn't on a strict diet for a role, she's much curvier than I am. I'm not sure Ares would find me appealing after being with someone like my sister. "I'm not sure highlighting my body is a good idea."

Sierra snatches the gown back from me, her eyes flashing with anger. "You're an idiot," she snaps. "You're one of the most beautiful women alive, and I'm not even being biased. You've been named that by several magazines. Channel the confidence you exude on the runway, Rave."

I bite down on my lip and look down. “Look, Sierra… there’s something I haven’t told you.”

She frowns, and I sit down on her bed. “Remember that night we went out and Ares came to pick us up because we were so drunk?”

She nods and sits down next to me, her eyes on mine as I tell her all about how I climbed onto his lap, the way I tried to seduce him, the things I said. “He wasn’t even remotely tempted, Sierra. A small part of me thought that I could get him to fold if I truly gave it my all, but I couldn’t. He wasn’t moved.”

She looks away and shakes her head. “I really doubt that, Rave. Even if that’s the case, it’s different now. You were unattainable to him before, but you’re his wife now. If he repeatedly sees you in various states of undress, he’s going to end up wanting you, even if he doesn’t right now. He won’t be able to stay away from you for three years, and he won’t cheat on you.”

I cross my arms and nod hesitantly. “Yeah,” I admit. “I don’t think he’ll cheat.”

She smiles at me and holds up the nightgown she bought me. “If you two end up sleeping together, he’ll end up falling for you. I know you think he’ll never stop loving your sister, but I call bullshit. He’s always looked at you a certain way, and there’s always been this unshakeable bond between you two. He just needs a push. Ares is a man of morals, and so long as he thinks he’s doing right by both Hannah and you by staying away, he will. Give him a reason to fold. Honestly, if you just outright tell him you want him to meet your physical needs, he’d fall as fast as a house of cards. I know he wants you. He just won’t admit it to himself.”

I stare at Sierra, wondering if it’s all just her own wishful thinking, or if she might be right. I feel like I played my hand and lost the night he took us home. I’m scared to put myself out there in the same way again.

“Trust me,” she tells me. “I know my brother, and he does *not* just see you as Hannah’s sister. If you aren’t comfortable with pursuing him directly, then just do this much, okay? Just wear the nightgowns I bought you and see how he responds to that. Just seduce him, slowly, until he gives in and comes to you. Watch his actions, Rave. I’m certain he’ll betray himself sooner or later. He wants you… and the line between lust and love is thin.”

I reach for the white nightgown she bought me and examine it. It’d barely cover anything… it’s too much.

“Just try it, Rave.”

I nod. “Fine. I’ll try it, but if it backfires, you’ll never hear the end of it.”

“It won’t,” she promises. Sierra seems so sure… I wish I could borrow some of her confidence. What is it that she’s seeing between Ares and me that I’m not seeing?

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Chapter Twenty-Six

ARES

I place my coffee cup on the counter when I hear the front door swing closed and walk toward the sounds in the hallway.

Raven looks up in surprise and freezes. Her hair is wet, and she's dressed in the same clothes she was wearing yesterday. She clearly spent the night somewhere, and it sure as hell wasn't here, in my bed — where she was supposed to be.

"Where have you been?" I ask, my voice deceptively calm.

"Ares." She lifts her hand to her chest. "You're up early."

I stare her down, trying to keep her from realizing how angry I am. "I asked you a question."

She frowns at me and tries to walk past me, but I grab her wrist and pull her against me. "*Where. Were. You?*" I snap.

She grits her teeth and glares at me. "Do you have any right to ask me that after you went for dinner with my sister? Don't be a hypocrite."

I pull her closer, until I've got her body flush against mine. "I do have that right, Raven. I'm your *husband*."

Her eyes flash and she smiles humorlessly. "You certainly don't act like it," she says, her voice filled with venom. "You went for dinner with Hannah a day after marrying me. Did you even come home last night, or did you just get in? Did you fuck her, Ares?"

I clench my jaw as I turn us around, pushing her against the wall. “What did you just say?” I ask through gritted teeth. “Did I *fuck* her?”

Raven looks up at me, her eyes flashing with anger… but there’s pain there too. I inhale shakily and drop my forehead to hers. “No,” I whisper. “I didn’t fuck her, Raven. Of course I didn’t. I promised you fidelity, and I always keep my promises. Do you truly think so little of me?”

She slides her arms around my neck and inhales shakily. Fuck. She fits against me so perfectly. “I don’t know what to think, Ares,” she admits. “I never thought we’d find ourselves in this situation, but now that we’re here, I’m not willing to stand aside and let you chase after your happiness.”

I nod and pull away a little to look at her. “I get it. You made sacrifices, and I can acknowledge that much. Perhaps it was wrong of me to go for dinner with Hannah, but I thought it would be best to get that conversation out of the way. I didn’t go see her because I missed her or wanted alone-time with her, Rave. I went to see her so I could put proper boundaries in place and end things with her.”

Her eyes widen. “You did?”

I reach for her and push a strand of her hair behind her ear. “Of course I did. Maybe she and I will find our way back together in a few years. Who knows? But in the meantime, she can’t be more than a friend to me. I won’t betray you. Hannah made her choice, and she’ll have to live with it the same way we do.”

She stares at me as though she can’t quite figure out if I’m lying to her or not, but I suppose there isn’t much I can say to convince her. Only time can prove my sincerity.

“Where were you?” I ask again, my tone calmer now.

“Sierra’s,” she says, and I exhale in relief. Of course. I should’ve known that.

“Don’t stay away from home without notifying me and pick up when I call you. It isn’t just because we can’t spend much time apart, but also because I was worried, Rave. I know you didn’t want to get married, but you are now, and it comes with some new responsibilities. One of them is keeping me informed of this kind of thing.”

“*Home*,” she repeats, her face scrunched up in disgust. “This isn’t my home,” she says, looking exhausted. “I’m not even sure it’s *yours*. It’s Hannah’s.”

I take a step back and look around. She's right. Nearly every single thing in here was chosen by Hannah. I let her do whatever she wanted, and I've never even truly loved my own home as a result. How did I never see that before?

"Raven," I tell her. "I meant what I said when you and I got married. It isn't what either of us wanted, but we're married now. I'll do right by you, starting with a formal announcement next month."

"What?" she asks, her eyes widening. "I thought…"

"You thought we'd keep our marriage a secret? We can't. Rumors about our wedding have already started to spread. We're much better off confirming the gossip. I refuse to sneak around with my own damn *wife*. Besides, do you really think Grandma would let us get away with that? If we don't break the news, she will. This way, we at least control the narrative."

Raven nods, her expression thoughtful. "What will you do in three years? How will you explain to the media that you're divorcing your wife to marry her sister?"

"I'll tell them the truth. I'll prove that Hannah and I have been dating for years, but that you and I were forced to get married."

She stares at me, but I'm not sure what she's searching for. "I'd rather keep it a secret, Ares. I don't want to be the jilted wife. I don't want to be the villain in your story."

I grit my teeth and take a step closer to her, placing my index finger underneath her chin. I tilt her face up toward mine and smile humorlessly. "I won't be your dirty little secret, Mrs. Windsor. You carry my name, and you'll do it with pride."

Raven blinks in confusion for a moment, but then realization dawns. She looks at me as though she can see right through me, to the insecurity Hannah instilled in me by keeping our relationship quiet for so long. "I only suggested it because I think it'd be in your best interests, Ares. I won't hide our marriage if you don't want me to. I'm not her."

I let go of her and look away, wishing I'd just have kept my cool. Why is it that I always had endless patience with Hannah, yet it's different with Raven?

"Don't," I snap, unsure who I'm mad at, myself or her. "Don't hide our marriage. I'll be making a formal announcement on my social media

channels four weeks from now, and I highly recommend that you do the same. Our PR team is working on our statements."

She smiles at me and nods. "Sure. Just tell me when. I've got a cute photo from our wedding that I want to share."

The relief I feel at her words is unreal. Our marriage might not be real, but at least it's out in the open. No sneaking around, no making excuses. It's what I always wanted with Hannah.

Raven walks past me, and I follow her into our dressing room. I watch her as she pulls a dress off its hanger. It only took the staff a day to pack up all of Hannah's stuff and replace it with Raven's, yet it's hard to remove every trace of her. Everything here was designed by her, including the interior of this dressing room. I never thought I'd want that to change, but I do. For at least the next three years, Raven will be my wife. She told me she didn't want to live in Hannah's shadow, and I need to ensure that she doesn't.

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Chapter Twenty-Seven

ARES

I look up in surprise when the kitchen door opens. Raven walks in wearing a sports bra and some really tight leggings that make it impossible to keep my eyes off her. She freezes when she sees me, her eyes wide.

"Morning," she says, a forced smile on her face.

"Morning."

Things have been weird between us lately. It's like we no longer know how to behave around each other, when we used to be such good friends. I suppose most of that is caused by me. I've been waking up early and working late to avoid going to bed with her. I feel horrible about forcing her into this marriage, but I'm not making it any better by avoiding her. If anything, I just seem to be making her uncomfortable, and I have no doubt she's started to feel unwelcome around me. I need to get my shit together.

Raven walks over to the coffee machine, giving me one hell of a view of her ass. This is part of the reason I've been staying away from her all week. Having her here at home with me has made it impossible to ignore how fucking beautiful she is. Just seeing her in the sexy nightgowns she wears at night makes it impossible to think straight. I'm scared I'll do or say something inappropriate. Raven and I are straddling this weird line of being married yet being nothing more than friends, and I don't know how to deal with it.

“Ares?”

I look up at Raven and force a smile onto my face.

“I asked if you wanted another cup of coffee?”

I shake my head and tip my head toward the fridge. “No, thank you. There’s some breakfast for you in the fridge. Donna told me you haven’t been eating much? Is the food not to your liking?”

She tenses for a moment and shakes her head. “No, it’s not that. I just… I can’t eat much, Ares. I’m a model, remember?”

I push away from the kitchen counter and walk up to her, my hands wrapping around her waist, my fingers touching on either end. “Rave, you can afford to eat a little more. You’d still be the sexiest woman alive, you know?”

Her eyes widen, and then she smirks. “Is that so?”

I bite down on my lip, realizing what I just said. What’s wrong with me? This is exactly what I’ve been worried about. I’ve never had a problem keeping inappropriate thoughts about her deeply suppressed, so what changed?

I let go of her and take a step away, but she follows and wraps her hands around my tie.

“Can we stop?” she asks, her tone pleading.

“Stop what?”

“This,” she whispers. “Dancing around each other, avoiding each other. We’ve been married for a week and I’ve barely seen you, much less spoken to you. Why is that I feel like I lost one of my closest friends?”

Her words catch me off-guard, and I reach for her, the back of my hand brushing over her cheek. “Rave,” I murmur. “I just… I thought it would be good to give you space. The last couple of days have been *a lot* for both of us. I was worried I’d make you uncomfortable. Being in each other’s personal space like that, I’m not sure. I just didn’t want to overwhelm you.”

It isn’t the full truth, but it’s as close as I can give her right now.

“You are,” she tells me. “You *are* making me uncomfortable by keeping your distance. It’s weird, and I hate it. We’ve always been friends, Ares. Why does that need to change? Surely marriage should’ve brought us closer? Do you truly hate being married to me that much?”

A hint of pain flashes through her eyes, and it fucking guts me. Fuck. “What? No, Raven. What the fuck?” I wrap my hands around her waist and

lift her on top of the kitchen counter with ease. Her eyes widen, and she places her hands against my chest.

I take a step closer to her and stand between her legs, unsure what to say, yet unable to push aside my sudden intense need to reassure her. “I just feel guilty, Rave. I’m pissed off at Hannah, and I’m mad at myself for doing this to you. Fuck. I just…” How do I explain that I’m having a hard time accepting that the life I so carefully planned out vanished into thin air? How do I tell her that my mind is a complete fucking mess, and that I can’t figure out why I’m not more upset about the way things worked out, the way Hannah and I parted ways? I should be heartbroken, but more often than not, it isn’t even Hannah I’m thinking about — it’s Raven. I want to do right by her, and I don’t know how to do that. I don’t want to clip her wings, and I can’t bear to see her smile dim. I don’t want to make her feel trapped in this marriage with me. I’m terrified that she’ll come to resent me for forcing her into this.

She inhales shakily and looks into my eyes. “I’ll never be her,” she says softly. “I know that, Ares. I know I’m not the woman you want to wake up to. I know you can’t stand having me in your bed at night. I get it. I know you’re hurting, Ares. But please… please don’t distance yourself from me. If asking you to treat me as your wife is too much, then all I’ll ask for is your friendship. I miss you, Ares. What do I do? How do I make my presence more bearable for you?”

“Bearable?” I repeat, confused. “Fucking hell, Cupcake.” I drop my forehead to hers and inhale deeply. She’s always smelled like vanilla cupcakes and sunshine. Many things have changed throughout the years, but not this. “I’m so fucking sorry.” I pull away to look at her. “It’s not you, baby. Your presence in my home doesn’t make me even remotely uncomfortable. It’s quite the opposite. I’m worried being around *me* is uncomfortable for *you*. I’ll be honest with you, Rave, I’m having a hard time processing everything that happened. It’s hard to believe that you’re my wife now, and I can’t quite figure out what that even means for us.”

She smiles at me so sweetly that my heart clenches. “Didn’t we agree that we don’t have to figure it out right away? I can tell you this much, though: there’s nowhere else I’d rather be. There isn’t much you could do that’d make me uncomfortable, and if you do, I’ll simply tell you.” She raises her finger to her lips. “These lips excel at complaining about things.

I’m not some meek woman you need to protect, Ares. I wouldn’t be here if I hadn’t *chosen* to marry you.”

My gaze drops to her lips, and I swallow hard. Fuck. She tasted so good on our wedding day, and I’ve wanted another taste ever since. How would she react if I tell her I’ve been a fucking mess because I want her and dream of her every single night? Would she think I’m a sick son of a bitch?

“I hear you,” I murmur. “I’ll do better from now on.”

She nods. “No more avoiding me, okay?”

“I promise.”

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Chapter Twenty-Eight

RAVEN

I watch my phone ring as I park my car in front of Ares's house, my heart heavy. It's a strange feeling to *want* to hope for something yet knowing better. What is that even? Does that have a name? It isn't hope, but rather a longing for it.

I wish I had it in me to so much as hope that my mother is calling me simply because she misses me. A soft sigh escapes my lips as I grab my bag and get out of the car, declining her call for the fifth time, but that doesn't deter her. My phone starts to ring again, and I steel myself as I finally pick up.

"Mom?" I press my thumb against the scanner, and the front door swings open.

"Raven, I've been calling you for over an hour now." She sounds irritated, and a strange ache spreads from my heart. "What took you so long?"

I put my phone on loudspeaker as I take off my coat. "I had a shoot that ran late because no matter what we did, the photographer wasn't satisfied with the shots. I'm exhausted, Mom. I went straight home after it, so most of your calls came in while I was driving."

"Raven, doesn't your car have a hands-free function? Goodness. Surely it's not that hard to set that up?"

I bite down on my lip harshly in an effort to keep my retorts in. There's no point in arguing with her. The one most affected by that would be me, and I don't have the energy to upset myself unnecessarily.

"What are you calling for, Mom?"

She hesitates for a moment. "Hannah has been very upset all week. She hasn't left her apartment, and each time I go over to check up on her, I find her crying. I don't know what to do, Rave. Do you think you could speak to her? I asked her if she'd heard from you, and she told me you haven't even called her once. How could you do that, Raven? You know how sensitive she is and how badly she needs us all right now."

I stare at my phone for a moment before I reach down to take off my shoes, giving myself a moment or two. She was so different on the day I got married, and I hoped the change would last, that she finally realized that the way she's been treating me is unfair. I should've known better. The moment Hannah comes up, she forgets every promise she made me. Everyone always does.

"Mom," I say carefully. "The only reason I married Ares is because she *refused* to. I'm not sure I understand what you want from me. In a matter of days, I've lost *everything*. I've had to leave my apartment, the home I built and *loved*, to move in with someone who doesn't want me here. How do you think I'm feeling? What do you think it's like to be married to someone who avoids me because looking at me reminds me of the woman he'd rather see? Don't you think Hannah owes *me* an apology for making me take responsibility for her selfishness? *Don't* tell me to call her and console her because this mess that we're both trapped in is of *her* making."

"You selfish little girl," she snaps. "You'll never change, will you? You will never have it in you to be the bigger person, will you? Can't you see that this is going to ruin your relationship with your sister? Hannah isn't going to reach out because she's heartbroken, and she's never been good at telling us when she's in pain. You know exactly why that is, Raven. It's the result of years and years of her being sick, of feeling like a burden. I'm not saying Hannah isn't wrong, but so are you. We both know that your marriage to Ares is just temporary, so why not just make her feel better? Would it really kill you to pick up the phone and reassure her?"

"Would it kill *her* to do the same for me?"

Mom sighs. "I'm so incredibly disappointed in you, Raven. I don't understand how you two can both be my daughters when you're so

different. I wish you could be more like your sister."

I laugh humorlessly. "Yeah, join the club, Mom. *Everyone* wishes I could be Hannah, but I'm not. I'll *never* be her." I run a hand through my hair and stare up at the ceiling.

"No," Mom agrees. "You'll never be her, but you can at least try to be half the woman she is. Call your sister, Raven."

She hangs up on me, and I bite down on my lip harshly in an effort to suppress my tears, yet they fall anyway. Each and every time I speak to her, I'm left feeling like an awful daughter. I should just give in and do what she asks, but I know I'd hate myself even more if I did.

"Raven."

I turn around to find Ares leaning against the wall, his arms crossed. The way he's looking at me tells me he's been standing there a while, and I sigh as I let my eyes fall closed for a moment as mortification washes over me.

"Cupcake," he says, his tone gentle.

"I don't want your pity." I glance at him, taking in the gray sweatpants he's wearing and the white t-shirt that showcases his muscular arms. Just looking at him hurts. I hate that I want him. I hate that I'm his wife, yet I'm the one person he least wants to see. "Or is it not pity you're offering me? Let me guess, you agree that I should call your precious Hannah, don't you?"

He pushes away from the wall and walks toward me, but I hold up my hand and shake my head. "Forget it. Whatever it is, I don't need to hear it."

I move to walk past him, but he grabs my wrist and holds me in place. "Cupcake, all I wanted to ask is if you've had time to eat today. Shall I warm something up for you?"

I blink in surprise and shake my head. "No," I tell him, my shoulders slumping. "Thank you, Ares, but I just… I'm going to bed early tonight."

I pull my wrist out of his grip and escape into our bedroom, my heart heavy. Tonight is the first night that he's been home before me, and I have no doubt it has everything to do with the conversation we had this morning. I asked him to stop avoiding me, yet here I am, running away.

My breathing is labored as I walk to our bathroom. I should be happy that Ares is home with me for once, but right now, in this moment, I wish he wasn't. Pure agony spreads from my heart to the rest of my body, until my throat closes up. Hot tears stream down my face as I undress, and I only

barely manage to hold it together. I try my hardest to breathe through it, to keep my sobs in, but the moment the shower stream hits my skin, I fall apart.

It isn't just my mother and the pain she continues to cause. It's everything else too. Why is it that no matter what I do, I'm never good enough?

My soft sobs are drowned out by the shower's sound, and I lean against the wall as I allow myself to feel every bit of agony that I try to keep hidden.

Normally, the one thing I've got going for me is my work, but not today. I had to redo my shots over and over again because I couldn't get my expression *just right*, and then there are the issues I'm running into with sourcing materials for my next designs. My day had been awful before my mother called, but she undoubtedly made it worse. Am I really asking for too much when I wish that my mother would console *me* on a bad day instead of asking me to lend my sister a shoulder?

Why can't I ever be anyone's priority? What makes me so undeserving of that? Why can I never measure up against Hannah in my parents' eyes? In Ares's eyes? What is it that she's got and I'll never have? Why is my best never enough?

A crushing sense of defeat weighs me down as I struggle to breathe through my sobs, choking back my tears. I may have married Ares, but he can barely stand to be around me. I'm his wife now, but the price of that title was our friendship… and I'm pretty sure it's going to cost me a whole lot more than that in the long run. It'll cost me my precarious relationship with Hannah and my parents too.

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Chapter Twenty-Nine

ARES

I clench my jaw as I listen to the sound of my wife's sobs through the bathroom door. She's trying her hardest to be quiet, and it kills me. I have no doubt I'm one of the sources of her pain, and I don't know how to make it better.

The shower turns off, and I take a step away, making my way to our bed instead. I get in and grab my phone, unsure how to act. For a moment, I consider texting my sister and asking her to come over, but then I think better of it. If it's Sierra she needed, she would've just gone there herself, wouldn't she?

Raven walks out wearing an oversized t-shirt instead of one of the sexy nightgowns I've gotten used to, yet she somehow looks even more irresistible than usual. She pauses when she sees me sitting up in bed and averts her gaze instantly, no doubt hoping I won't notice how red her beautiful eyes are.

I force myself to look away and pretend to be engrossed in my phone instead. I don't know how to face her. I want to be there for her, but I don't want to push or intrude if that's not what she needs.

Raven is quiet as she gets into bed with me. I expected her to say something, anything at all, but she just turns her back to me and curls up in a ball, her breathing still uneven.

I watch her for a moment, taking in the way her small hands are wrapped around the covers, the sound of her shallow breathing. She sounds as though she could burst into tears at any moment, all over again, but she's trying her hardest not to. Tonight, more than ever, I wish I could be the person she'd rely on. I'd give the world to be the person she turns to when her heart aches, when it's comfort she seeks.

I take a deep breath before pulling up the app that controls everything in the house. I'm unsure if I should dim the lights or turn them off altogether. What is it that she wants? Considering the way she just hid in the shower, I suspect it's darkness she wants.

The lights turn off, and I lie down next to her, at a loss. It's only been a few days since we got married, yet I've seen so many facets of her that I never realized existed. She's always acted so sweet and carefree around me, but I'm now seeing both strength and weakness that I didn't realize she carries. It only makes her more beautiful. She's unlike any other woman I know. Those small shoulders of hers carry dozens of burdens, few of them her own.

I turn toward her and mimic her position, keeping a bit of distance between us. "Rave," I whisper. She tenses but doesn't reply. Instead, she tightens her grip on our covers. Fucking hell. It kills me to know she's hurting and that I can't make it right. The things she just told her mother… fuck. I had no idea I'd made her feel so unwanted. I may not be able to fix her relationship with her mother, but I don't want her to feel insecure in our marriage. The fact that she does means that I failed her as her husband.

I reach for her hesitantly and place my hand on her arm. She sniffs, and for a moment I think she'll pull away from me, but then she turns around to face me. "Ares," she says, her voice breaking as fresh tears fill her eyes. "I… Can I have a hug?"

Fuck. The pain in her voice fucking guts me. My heart wrenches as I pull her into my arms with more force than I intended, one hand wrapping underneath her, while the other curls around her. I hug her tightly, her body flush against mine.

Raven nestles her nose against my neck and inhales shakily as her arm wraps around me. Her touch is cautious, hesitant, as though she's scared she's asking for too much. She's my wife, yet she hesitates to ask for a *hug*. Just how uncomfortable have I made her?

“You never even need to ask,” I whisper as my hand threads through her hair, my grip tight. She holds onto me so tightly that I find myself holding her a little tighter too. She fits against me so perfectly, it’s unreal. Her breathing is uneven, as though she’s still holding back tears, and I let my fingers trail over her back, slowly, soothingly.

“Are you okay, Cupcake?”

She shakes her head and balls the back of my shirt in her hand. “I don’t think so.” She sounds so fucking hurt that I’m blinded by rage for a moment. Listening to that conversation with her mother and not interfering was one of the hardest things I’ve ever had to do. I’m so tempted to destroy every single thing that hurts her, but I can’t do that when it’s her *mother*.

“Talk to me, baby. Tell me what’s going on in that beautiful mind of yours.”

She drags her nose up my throat and shifts in my embrace, pressing her breasts against me harder. It takes all of me to keep my attention away from how she feels against me.

“It’s just too much, Ares. I feel… I feel so *unwanted*. So *unloved*. I just… I feel like a failure, like no matter what I do, I won’t ever be what anyone wants me to be. Even work was a nightmare today, and I just… how could I fail so miserably? It’s one thing to fail at everything else in life, but my career is my escape. I just… today I just really needed one single win. Just one.”

She inhales shakily, as though she’s holding back tears all over again. I don’t know which photographer she worked with today, but she’ll never work with him again. Matter of fact, *he’ll* never work again. Not in this industry. For his sake, I hope he enjoys wildlife photography, because that’s the only avenue I’ll leave open to him.

“And then there’s my mother and you. You both want me to be something I’m not, *someone* I’m not, and it hurts. Don’t get me wrong, I’m not blaming you at all. I get it. I really do, but—”

“—no,” I cut her off, “you *don’t* get it, Raven.” I grab her tightly and turn us over so she’s on her back, my body on top of hers. Her eyes widen as I hold myself up on my forearms so I can look at her. For a moment, I see something flash in her eyes that I recognize. *Loneliness*. *Longing*. Those are feelings I know all too well, and I never want her to feel them around *me*.

“I don’t need you to be anything or anyone else. Not ever. *You’re* my wife, Raven. You. No one else. You don’t need to compare yourself to anyone else, and you don’t need to measure up to anyone else either — because whether you realize it or not, you’ve already surpassed every standard anyone has ever set for you. Just because they won’t or can’t acknowledge it doesn’t mean you’re anything short of amazing. You’re perfect the way you are. And no, I’m not saying that to placate you. I’m telling you that because it’s *true*. You have a sense of loyalty so strong that you married me and sacrificed the future you envisioned for yourself. You’re fucking beautiful, and you’re smart, *real smart*. How many women do you know that have a full-time modeling career and a thriving business? Fuck anyone who can’t see your worth, Rave. Fuck them all.”

“Including you?”

I blink in surprise and smirk at her, my cock involuntarily stirring at her words. “Yeah,” I whisper, a wicked smile on my face. “Fuck me too.”

She bites down on her lip, her sorrow making way for something that looks a lot like lust. Fuck. I drop my forehead to hers in an attempt to steer the conversation back to where it was, but having my lips so close to hers isn’t helping. This chemistry between us… it’s always been there, but it’s inescapable now.

“In all seriousness, Rave… I’m sorry I was one of the reasons you were upset today. I’m so fucking sorry, you have no idea.” I pause and inhale deeply, her signature cupcake scent sending my heart into overdrive. “I want you here, Raven. There is no one I’d rather have in my bed than you. *No one.* You may not believe that, but it’s true. From the moment I married you, you’ve had my loyalty right down to my every thought. There’s no one on my mind but you. When I look at you, all I see is my *wife*. Nothing else. *No one else.* There’s no space for anyone but you — not in my mind, and not in my heart. This may all sound like pretty lies and a poor attempt to console you, and I get that, but baby, over time you’ll realize that it’s the truth.”

I shift on top of her, my lips brushing over her forehead as I press a chaste kiss to her skin. “I never meant to make you feel like you’re unwanted, because you aren’t. Do you have any idea how much it means to me that you chose to marry me? You could’ve walked away from everything and left me to deal with the consequences, but you didn’t. You were there for me when I needed you most, Rave, and I’ve done a really

shitty job of thanking you for it. I'll do better, okay? I just… it was hard for me too, and I was foolish to assume I knew what you needed. I'm learning the hard way that I only ever knew a small part of you, and it'll take me a little bit of time to discover the rest. Will you give me that, Rave? Will you give me some grace? Will you forgive me for fucking up?"

She buries her hands into my hair, and I swallow hard. The way she looks at me… yeah, she's got my heart racing in a way it never has before. There's so much trust and hope in her expression, and it fills me with a deep need to give her the fucking world. I never want to let her down, and from now on, I won't. I've never felt something so… intense. I want her desperately, but my entire fucking heart is in it, too. My need for her transcends the physical, and it's something I've never experienced before.

"I'll give you some grace," she murmurs. "On one condition. Honor my request, Ares. No assumptions, no overthinking. Please, Ares. Please communicate with me. Do you know how hard it was for me to admit how I've been feeling? I just… all week I've felt like I was losing you, and I… I just don't want to be kept guessing. Please don't do that to me."

I tilt my head and press a soft kiss to her cheek, just on the edge of her lip. "I'm sorry," I tell her as I hold myself up on my forearms so I can look her in the eye. "I promise to communicate from now on, no matter how hard it is. It's just… I'm so used to all these fucking mind games that this is… it's new to me, Rave."

She reaches for me and cups the side of my face. "You give me honesty, and I'll give you grace. How about that?"

I nod, my heart racing. I don't think I've ever had a moment that felt this *real*. Not with anyone. But then again, for years now, the only one that's ever been able to make me lose my endless patience is the woman lying underneath me, my *wife*. "Yeah," I whisper. "I promise."

She smiles at me so sweetly that my heart clenches. "Then give me a moment of honesty, Ares. Tell me one thing no one else knows? Give me a part of you no one else has."

The edges of my lips turn up into a small smile. "You already have my last name, Raven. It's the one thing I'll never give to anyone else."

"Never?"

I shake my head and grab her tightly, taking her with me as I roll onto my back. She shifts in my embrace, until she's got her head on my chest

and her leg hooked over my hip, her inner thigh brushing against my cock teasingly. Does she realize how hard she makes me?

“Never,” I promise her. The moment I married her, I knew Hannah and I were over. I never should’ve entertained the idea of divorcing Raven in three years — not unless she asks it of me. That isn’t me, and she deserves better.

She looks up at me and smiles, and it fucking does something to me. I can’t quite explain it, but I’m certain I’ll always remember the way she’s looking at me right now.

“Feel better, Cupcake?”

She nods, and I hold her tightly, my hand stroking her back until her breathing evens out. I stare up at the ceiling as she falls asleep in my arms, my thoughts whirling. I can’t believe I’ve been staying away from her when I could’ve had *this* all along. One night with her, and I think I’m already addicted.

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Chapter Thirty

ARES

I stare up at Raven's office building, thinking back to the last time I was here. I'd come to pick her up because I needed a present for Hannah's birthday, and she'd been more distant than usual. Perhaps it's wishful thinking on my part, but could it be that she was acting that way because she didn't want me to marry Hannah? I shake my head and run a hand through my hair as I walk in. Lately, my mind has been a mess. Perhaps it's all been cognitive dissonance, a way of convincing myself that there really could be something between Raven and me… or maybe there's some truth to my suspicions.

The lady at the reception desk rises to her feet when I walk in, her eyes widening. "Mr. Windsor," she says, sounding surprised.

"Hello. I apologize for barging in unexpectedly. Could you tell me where I can find my wife?"

She smiles then and points at one of the doors. "Raven is in her office."

I nod in thanks and push Raven's office door open, my smile melting off my face at the scene in front of me. My darling wife is standing by the window, her face inches from Diego Massimo's, a famous fashion designer who is far too fucking handsome for his own good.

What in the fuck am I walking in on here? Why the fuck is he standing so close to her? A rush of pure violence courses through me as he looks up

at me. Raven's hands are on his shirt, and she steps back when she sees me, putting some distance between them.

"Ares?" She sounds shocked, as if I'm interrupting something, and jealousy uncurls in my stomach.

I grit my teeth and walk up to her, my arm wrapping around her waist as I pull her into me roughly. Her eyes widen and I smile at her despite my anger, my free hand wrapping into her hair. "Cupcake," I say through gritted teeth.

She looks up at me, her eyes filled with questions. "What are you doing here?" Her voice is soft and carries a hint of confusion. I thought she might be happy to see me, but it's clear that she's not. Perhaps I'm not the only one with lingering connections from the past.

I smile humorlessly as I tighten my grip on her hair and lean in, my nose brushing against her. "Why? Can't I surprise my wife at work?" I ask, my voice loud enough for Massimo to hear me calling her *my wife*. Then I lean in further, my lips brushing over hers. Raven inhales sharply, and I capture her bottom lip between my teeth for a moment, sucking down on it before I tilt my head to kiss her fully. She melts against me as my tongue brushes over her lips, opening up for me. Fucking hell. I don't think I'll ever tire of kissing her, of claiming her as *mine*. Raven's arms wrap around my neck as she rises to her tiptoes, and I smile against her lips, pulling away a little to look at her.

Laying my claim in this way in front of Diego is a petty move, but I don't give a fuck. Especially not when she smiles at me like that.

"This is definitely a pleasant surprise," she murmurs. Relief washes over me at her words and the lack of worry or guilt in her eyes. She wouldn't touch me this way if there was anything between them.

Raven glances at Diego and steps away a little, but I keep my arm wrapped tightly around her waist, refusing to let her go. "This is my husband, Ares Windsor," she tells Diego.

I recognize the displeasure in the man's eyes as he stares at us. He's got a thing for my wife, no doubt. "I suppose the rumors are true, after all," he says, his voice carrying a hint of disappointment.

Raven smiles and looks up at me. It's been weeks since I've seen her smile this way. "Diego and I are collaborating on a new fashion line. We're co-designing some pieces that I'm really excited about."

I nod and brush her hair out of her face, overcome with an intense need to mark her as mine somehow. I don't want there to be any ambiguity when she's around other men. I want it to be clear that she's mine, and I can't make sense of it, because I've never been a particularly possessive man. "I can't wait to see your designs, Cupcake. I have no doubt they'll be phenomenal," I murmur.

She grins up at me, and I smile back at her, my irrational fears put at ease. It seems like she doesn't even realize how Diego feels about her, and I'm glad she doesn't.

"I want a bit of your time today, Rave. I brought my laptop so I can wait for you while you work."

Her eyes widen. "Oh! Well, I'm actually just about done. I can do the rest of my work from home." She turns to Diego and smiles at him as she steps away from me. "I'll wrap up the revisions we discussed today and send them over to you."

He glances from me to her and nods reluctantly. I have no doubt he'd been planning to ask her out for dinner after this meeting of theirs, but that isn't happening on my watch.

"Then I will see you again soon, beautiful," he says, nodding at me politely as he walks out. I turn toward Raven when the door falls closed, barely able to contain my annoyance.

"Why was he standing so close to you?" I snap.

There's a knowing look in her eyes, and she smiles at me so fucking sweetly. "I was fixing his tie for him."

"Don't do that again," I tell her, clenching my jaw. "The only man you're touching is *me*."

Her eyes widen in surprise, and for a moment, I expect her to tell me off. Instead, she grins. "Is that so, Ares?" Her hands move to my tie, and she plays with it, straightening it for me. "What if I have needs you can't fulfill?"

A need for pure violence rushes through me at the thought of her with some other man, and my hands wrap around her waist as I lift her up. A soft gasp escapes her lips as I carry her to her desk, placing her at the edge of it before I spread her legs to stand between them. The skirt she's wearing rides up her thighs, and I catch a glimpse of her bright red underwear.

"Cupcake, there's no need I can't fulfill," I promise her. My hands wrap around her thighs and I pull her flush against me, letting her feel my rapidly

hardening cock. “You will *not* turn toward anyone but me, you hear me? If you want sex, I’ll give it to you. I’ll fuck you right here on this fucking desk if you want me to. Don’t even fucking dream of being with anyone else. Am I making myself clear?”

She looks up at me and nods, her eyes filled with an emotion I can’t quite name. She’s never looked at me this way before. Maybe that night when she was drunk wasn’t just a fluke. Maybe a small part of her truly does want me.

My thoughts fill with images of her underneath me, her pussy wrapping around my cock, her heat and tightness driving me mad. Maybe… my dreams could come true after all. I’ve never dared think of her this way, but she’s my *wife* now.

Raven clears her throat, a blush staining her cheeks as she averts her gaze, flustered. There were hints of insecurity and doubt in her eyes, and I can’t quite understand why. Can’t she feel how fucking hard she makes me? It’s impossible for her not to realize what kind of effect she has on me.

Now, more than ever, I want her to know that she’s the only one on my mind. I keep thinking of the words that tumbled out of her lips when she was on the phone with her mother, and each time those words reverberate through my mind, my blood fucking boils. I need Raven to know that I can barely think straight when I look at her. Thinking of someone else when she’s in the vicinity is near impossible, but how do I make her see that?

“What are you even doing here?” she asks, her voice trembling.

I let go of her and force my thoughts to calm. “There’s somewhere I want to take you today. I suppose it’s a surprise of some sort,” I tell her, my voice soft.

“Where?”

I offer her my hand, and she takes it hesitantly. “You’ll see.”

Raven is silent as I lead her to my car, and I wonder what she’s thinking. Did I overstep with what I said to her just now? Fucking hell. Why is it that I always lose my patience with her? The mere thought of her sleeping with someone else had me seeing red, and it’s leaving me feeling confused. I’ve never had this issue with Hannah. I couldn’t care less how many men wanted her and simply considered it part of her job, but I can’t make that same distinction with Raven.

I can’t make sense of the way my wife makes me feel. I should be heartbroken over the way my relationship with Hannah ended, and perhaps

I should be somewhat resentful about my marriage with Raven, but I'm not, and I'm not sure why.

"Where are we?" she asks as I park the car in front of the building one of my friends owns.

"You'll see. Let's go." I walk around the car and open her door for her, offering her my hand. It's odd, because Hannah and I never held hands. She was always too scared to be photographed with me that way. Yet somehow, I won't take no for an answer with Raven. It's a simple thing, but I need her hand in mine when we're together.

Raven entwines our fingers, and I smile to myself as we walk in. "I want you to know that I have every intention of keeping my promises to you, Rave. You told me my home doesn't feel like ours, and you're right. So let's fix that, okay?"

She looks up at me in surprise when she realizes where I've taken her. "Castello Designs," she murmurs. I smile as my friends, Selena and Damien, walk up to us to greet us. They're a husband and wife team that does some of the best architecture and interior design I've ever seen. Selena's eyes drop to our joined hands, and she smiles. "If it isn't Mr. and Mrs. Windsor," she says, grinning. "I'm honored you chose us to design your home."

Raven looks up at me with a questioning gaze, and I smile reassuringly. "They're friends of mine, so I told them about us ahead of our formal announcement."

My wife grins at me, and something about that smile of hers sets my heart ablaze. I don't think I've seen her look even remotely as happy ever since we got married, and I only have myself to blame for it. I need to do better.

"Selena, Damien, meet my wife, Raven Windsor."

Raven *Windsor.* I love her first name paired with mine. It's a strange thing to enjoy, but I love saying it.

I thought Selena would treat Raven with the same coldness she's always treated Hannah with, but I worried for nothing.

They refused to work with Hannah, and though I could have, I never pressured them into doing it for me. I didn't have high hopes when I called them a few days ago, assuming they'd refuse to work with Raven too, but much to my surprise, they were more than happy to do so. I'm not too sure

what made them change their minds, but I suspect it has everything to do with Raven. The odd thing is that I don't think they've ever met.

Selena takes Raven away to discuss remodeling plans, and Damien claps me on my back with a knowing look. "We've got this," he promises. "We're going to build her a home so nice, she'll never want to leave."

I smile at him and nod. I fucking hope so. Raven deserves the world.

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Chapter Thirty-One

ARES

Hannah: *I miss you, Ares. How long are you going to ignore my messages? You said we could be friends, but now you won't even speak to me.*

Hannah*: I got the lead role in Stars That Shine. I know you had something to do with that. I know you still care, Ares. I promise I'll respect your boundaries. I know how you feel about marriage — I know that better than anyone else. Is it so bad that I still want you in my life? Is it so bad for me to think that you want the same?*

She's been texting me every day since we had dinner, but I have yet to respond. I'm feeling oddly conflicted. On the one hand, I'm mad at her for leaving me at the altar the way she did, yet on the other hand I'm relieved. I shouldn't be, but I am.

The door to my home office opens, and I lock my phone before putting it away, leaving Hannah's messages unanswered. Raven walks in wearing a red nightgown that puts my wildest fantasies to shame, and I try my hardest to keep my eyes off her body, but it's a losing battle. The fabric might as well be sheer for all that it's covering. I can see a hint of her dark nipples, and I'm not sure she's wearing anything underneath at all. I bite down on my lip as I remember the way she looked at me when she told me that she doesn't like wearing panties, her bare pussy in my lap and eyes on mine. What would have happened if I'd just given into my desire that night?

I try to tear my gaze off her and fail. Raven has always been sinfully beautiful, but seeing her dressed in this way is a turn-on of a different kind. This is for my eyes only, and I fucking love it.

“Look at this,” she tells me as she lifts herself on top of my desk, putting her breasts at eye level for me. She’s so fucking close… what would she do if I spread her legs right on top of my desk?

I clear my throat and glance at the sofa she’s showing me. “I like this darker one better,” I tell her as I swipe through the options.

Raven grins at me. “I was hoping you’d say that because it’s my favorite too.”

I look up at her in surprise. “You don’t need to ask me for my opinion, you know? You can do whatever you want.”

She shakes her head. “I don’t want to do that. I already feel like I’m intruding in your space.”

I grab her hand and hold it gently. “Don’t, Rave. There’s no need to feel that way. This is your home now.”

“It’s ours,” she corrects me. “I’m asking for your opinion because I want you to love our home too.”

I nod at her and entwine our fingers. Designing our home together has been much more fun than I expected it to be. It truly feels like we’re making it ours, but it’s bittersweet, because it also means I’m washing away everything related to Hannah. Raven and I haven’t spoken about her at all recently, and I’m hoping to keep it that way. It’s odd, the way she and I attempt to exist in this bubble where we pretend I wasn’t engaged to her sister for years, yet it seems to work for us, for now.

“Are you done with work?” she asks, glancing at my laptop.

I nod and close it. “Yeah. I’m exhausted.”

Raven glances at my pajamas and nods. “Let’s go to bed then.”

She tightens her grip on my hand and pulls me along, both of us quiet as we make our way to our bedroom. Day by day, each memory with Hannah gets overwritten, until one day, I’ll look around and find nothing but Raven written onto my walls.

Raven lets go of my hand and walks over to her side of the bed, her cheeks rosy. We’ve gone to bed together every night since the first night she fell asleep in my arms, but she still gets shy about it. It’s odd, because we’ve always been so comfortable with each other.

We’re both silent as we get into bed, and I turn toward her with a smile on my face. “Why are you so nervous, Cupcake?”

She chuckles and turns onto her side too, the two of us facing each other. “I’m not sure. I guess this is still just new to us?”

I look into her eyes, trying my hardest not to let my eyes dip down to her breasts. “Is it, though? You fell asleep in my arms on the sofa not that long ago.”

Her eyes widen just a fraction and she looks away, her cheeks reddening rapidly. “Did you have to remind me of that? I’m so embarrassed about my behavior that night, Ares. I can’t apologize enough.”

I reach for her and cup her cheek gently, turning her face back toward mine. “Don’t apologize,” I whisper. “I didn’t mind it one bit, despite what I might have told you then.”

She nods and lets her eyes fall closed, hiding from me once again. This time, I let her get away with it.

“This is not so bad, right?” she whispers eventually. “That night you told me that you’d never want me, and I know that. I know I’ll never be Hannah, but…”

“Don’t,” I cut her off. “Don’t mention her in our bed, Rave.”

She looks at me with so much sorrow in her eyes. “Moment of honesty? This bed doesn’t feel like *ours*. Every single night, I feel like I’m sleeping in *her* bed.”

Raven turns away from me, but I lean over her and force her to face me. “Then we’ll throw the whole damn bed out, Raven.” Her eyes widen, and I cup her cheek gently. “Let’s just order a new one.”

She nods and hesitantly reaches for the collar of my pajamas. “Can we throw these out too, then?”

I glance down in confusion. They’re plain blue checkered pajamas.

“I know Hannah and you have matching pajamas, and maybe it’s petty and immature, but I…”

I sit up in bed and pull her up with me until we’re both sitting on our knees. “So take it off, wife.”

The sheets bunch around her waist as she lifts a trembling hand to my chest. Her eyes meet mine, and she hesitates for a moment before she undoes my top button. I watch her beautiful face as more and more of my chest comes into view, taking note of the way she blushes, the way her

breathing accelerates. She undoes the last button, letting it fall open as she grabs the collars.

Raven looks at me, her gaze heated as she pushes my shirt off my shoulders, her fingers moving slowly as she takes her time, letting them trail over my skin, until my chest is left bare.

I raise my hips and tilt my head, provoking her. Raven hesitates, so I grab her hands and place them at the top of my pants. “You said you wanted it off, baby. So take it all off.”

She bites down on her lip and curls her fingers around the waistband before she pulls them down slowly.

Her breath hitches as she exposes the V lines on my lower stomach, and I can’t help the way my cock hardens. Having her hands on me when she’s got such a gorgeous blush on her face, her lips slightly parted. *Fuck.*

She pulls my trousers down until my thighs, and I smirk at her. “Good girl,” I whisper, and she looks up at me, clear desire in her eyes. This is how she looked at me the night I had her in my lap, and her expression has haunted my dreams ever since.

I smile to myself as I take off my pants, leaving me in nothing but my boxer shorts, my erection obvious. Raven stares at it and sucks down on her lower lip, her hard nipples betraying her desire.

“I’ve always hated sleeping in pajamas,” I admit, my voice soft, almost as though I’m subconsciously scared to break the moment. “I just didn’t want to make you uncomfortable by being half naked.”

She shakes her head and drags her eyes back up to mine. “I’m not uncomfortable at all. I see male models dressed in little to nothing all the time, remember?”

Annoyance washes over me at the thought of her doing intimate shoots with other men. I need to find a way to get her to move to my company. I don’t trust her manager either. Raven doesn’t seem to realize just how beautiful she is. It’s like she separates her model persona and her true self, and somehow, in her mind, the latter is lacking. I never understood why, but I’m determined to fix it.

“Oh, I remember,” I tell her, my voice terse. I lean in and gently tuck a strand of her behind her ear. “Remind me, that recent underwear campaign you did… it was something like this, wasn’t it?”

I pull her against me and thread one hand in her hair before tipping her head back to expose her neck. She gasps when I lower my lips to her ear,

my teeth grazing over her earlobe. “This is how you posed with Tom Foster, wasn’t it? Tell me, my love, was he as hard as I am when he held you like this?”

I kiss her neck, my teeth grazing over her skin for a moment before I suck down, leaving a small mark. Raven’s breath hitches, and the way she pushes her chest against mine makes me fucking feral. Her hands thread through my hair, her grip tight.

“No,” she says, her voice far too fucking alluring. “He’s very professional. The shoots aren’t as intimate as they look, I promise. There are so many people around, and we move from one position to another very quickly.”

I move my lips to her throat and kiss her there. “Good,” I tell her. “Good for him. He’ll get to produce co2 for another day, then.”

She giggles, and the sound goes straight to my heart, filling me with a longing that’s far deeper than my physical need for her. “I never realized you were so possessive,” she whispers.

I pull back to look at her and push my fingers up her scalp, grabbing more of her hair as my grip on her waist tightens. “I never was. Not until *you*. You… yeah, you changed the game. I want all of you, Raven. I need you to be mine in every single way.”

She looks at me with such vulnerability in her eyes. “I’m already yours, Ares.”

I let my fingers move up from her waist, over her ribs, until they’re tracing the underside of her breasts. “No,” I whisper. “Not yet. Not all of you. But you will be.”

I cup her face, my thumb brushing over her lips. She opens up for me, and I nearly fucking lose it when he tongue darts past my finger. She looks so fucking sexy, her hair messed up and in my grip, that sexy nightgown, that look in her eyes.

“Moment of honesty,” I whisper. “I can’t resist you. I haven’t stopped thinking about the way I kissed you at our wedding, and then again in your office. I need more, Raven. I need another taste.”

She leans in hesitantly, her lips brushing against the edge of mine. “Then take it,” she whispers. “I’m yours for the taking.”

I groan as my lips meet hers, her hands roaming over my body with the same need I’m feeling. She moans, and my cock fucking twitches with need. The way her tongue tangles with mine is unreal, and I already know I

want my cock in her pretty little mouth. My wife is a fucking enchantress, no doubt.

"Raven," I whisper against her lips, pulling away. She's panting, her lips slightly swollen, and *fuck me.* She's never looked more beautiful.

I smirk as I push against her shoulder, making her fall back onto our bed. "Ares," she moans, my name a plea on her lips.

"Do you have any idea how hard it's been for me lately, baby? Watching you walk around my home in these sexy little outfits? Every time you smile at me, you make me fucking weak."

I lean over her, my cock pressed right against her pussy as I hold myself up on my forearms. "You're not the only one who's been struggling, Ares," she whispers.

I grin and lean in, my lips brushing against hers, once, twice, before I dive in and kiss her fully. She feels so fucking amazing against me, and this is so fucking surreal. I thrust my hips into her, and she moans into my mouth, her leg hooking around my hip, as though she wants more. Fucking hell.

I groan when Raven pushes against my chest all of a sudden and pull away to look at her, confused. She looks conflicted and tips her head toward her phone. I hadn't even heard her alarm ring. "What the fuck is that?"

She pushes me off, and I sit up, my cock tenting in my boxers. "I've got a campaign that's going live in Asia now. As part of my contract, I'm required to engage with the content on social media for an hour."

I run a hand through my hair and groan loudly. "You're kidding me."

She shakes her head and starts to scroll through her phone. "It's awful timing, I know. I just…"

I pull her back against me and kiss her, my hand balling into her hair. "Fuck the campaign," I whisper in between kisses. "I'll pay the penalty. I'll do anything if you'll just let me keep kissing you."

She giggles and pushes against my chest, her expression admonishing despite the lust in her eyes. "No," she tells me. "That's not who I am. I hate being irresponsible like that."

She sits up in bed, and I groan as she puts her no-nonsense work face on. Yeah, there's no way she'll let me kiss her now.

I sit back next to her, our shoulders touching as I try my hardest to calm my raging cock. I don't recall the last time I wanted someone this desperately. I don't think I ever have.

Raven gasps and then bursts out laughing, her cheeks turning rosy once again. My curiosity piqued, I lean in over her shoulder and glance at her phone.

“What the fuck?” I yank her phone out of her hand and stare at the dick pic in her Instagram DMs. “Who the fuck is this?”

Jealousy more intense than anything I’ve ever felt before steals my every thought, replacing it with images of Raven and some boyfriend she’s hidden from me.

“No idea,” she says, stealing her phone back. “I get these all the time.” I watch as she deletes the message and moves on to the next one, completely unfazed and entirely unaware of my burning jealousy.

What the fuck is even wrong with me? I have no doubt that Hannah received countless similar messages and I’ve always simply disregarded it as part of her job, but I’m finding it impossible to do the same with Raven.

“Raven.”

She raises her brows in question, and I reach for her hand, entwining our fingers.

“Where the fuck is your wedding ring?”

Her eyes widen, and she looks away. “I took it off.”

“What do you mean, *you took it off*?”

She pulls her hand out of mine and slips it underneath the covers. “It just… it’s very much Hannah’s style, but it isn’t mine. It doesn’t feel right to wear it.”

I roll onto my back and stare up at the ceiling for a moment, trying to collect my thoughts, yet finding it impossible to do so.

“Next week,” I tell her, my tone harsher than I intended. “We’ll buy you a new ring next week, and you *will* wear it.”

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Chapter Thirty-Two

ARES

I glance at the clock and frown. It's nearly ten in the evening, but Raven still isn't home. This is the third day in a row she's been working this late, and I'm worried. She's overworking herself. She uses our home gym every single morning and leaves home with nothing but a disgusting looking green smoothie. Then she works a full day doing whatever modeling gigs she's got scheduled before she goes to her own office and works there for several hours. She works too hard, and she barely eats. She doesn't get enough rest either. This isn't sustainable, but I don't know how to get her to take better care of herself.

Part of me is also concerned that I made her uncomfortable when I kissed her, and that perhaps that is the reason she's been coming home so late. She seemed into it, but I know what she's like. She's had too much time to overthink it now, to feel guilty when she shouldn't.

My phone rings, and I instantly smile, thinking it'll be Raven. She's taken to calling me while she's in the car home, and it's become one of my favorite parts of the day.

But it isn't her.

I stare at my phone screen, unsure whether I should pick up or not. In the end, I decide to take the call.

"Ares?"

“Hannah.”

“God, I missed you so much. I just… why have you been declining my calls? I know you’re mad at me, Ares, I get it. I really fucked up this time, and I know I hurt you, but please don’t ignore me like that. You know I can’t take it when you do that.”

I lean back on our brand new sofa and sigh. “Has it ever occurred to you that my needs might differ from yours? Yeah, Han, I know you can’t take the silent treatment, but what I need above everything else is space.”

She’s silent for a moment. “Ares, I… what’s gotten into you? You… you’ve never treated me this way before. I really am sorry, honey. I swear to you that I didn’t know they’d make Raven do this. I didn’t mean to get us entangled in this crazy situation. Do you really think I wanted you to marry my *sister*? Do you have any idea how upset I am she let it happen at all?”

I clench my jaw and run a hand through my hair. “It isn’t her fault. You don’t get to blame her for *your* choices.”

“Ares! None of this would’ve happened if she’d just stayed away. I’m not sure what she was thinking. I suppose it’s Mom and Dad’s company she’s after.”

The door opens, and I look up when Raven walks into the living room with a sweet smile on her face.

“Look, I need to go. I’ll talk to you later.”

Raven frowns at me when I end the call before Hannah even has a chance to say goodbye. She calls me straight back, and I rush to decline the call, a weird sense of guilt holding me captive. All I did was speak to Hannah, yet somehow I feel like I cheated on my wife.

“Who was that?” she asks, her voice soft.

I hesitate. “Hannah.”

Raven stares at me for a moment, and then she huffs and shakes her head. She clenches her jaw angrily and walks past me, heading straight to our bedroom.

“It wasn’t anything,” I tell her, following her. “I told her we could be friends, but I’d been ignoring her messages, so she called me.”

Raven pauses and looks at me over her shoulder. “Friends,” she repeats mockingly, before rolling her eyes.

“Rave,” I plead.

She shakes her head and walks into the bathroom, slamming the door closed behind her.

Fuck. What am I supposed to do? I'm not even sure I did anything wrong at all. For God's sake. Things have been going so well between Raven and me, and I fucked it all up. I fucking knew speaking to Hannah wouldn't bode well for me. I know what Hannah wants from me, and I'm well aware I can't give her that. I don't even *want* to, but Raven would never believe that. How could she when she's had to see me with her sister for years?

I sit down on the bed we chose together, trying to think of a way to appease her. I promised her loyalty when we got married, and I need her to know that I'd never stray. If nothing else, I want her to know I won't ever betray her.

She walks out of the bathroom in nothing but a towel and pauses when she sees me sitting on our bed. Her eyes flash with anger, and I hesitantly hold my hand out. "Come here, Rave."

She narrows her eyes at me, but she does as I ask, standing between my spread legs, her eyes on mine.

I grab her hand and place my phone in it. "Check. I haven't replied to any of her messages. Check my call history. Today is the first time I picked up when she called."

"You think I won't?" she snaps.

I smile up at her. "Baby, I gave you my phone because I *want* you to check. This isn't me playing games with you. This is me giving you the honesty you asked for."

She stares at my phone, and for a moment, pure agony flashes through her eyes. Then she hands me back my phone, her expression grave. "Never mind," she tells me, her voice soft. "I don't need to see any of that."

I stare at my wife for a moment. "You asked for honesty, didn't you? So give me a moment of honesty. I want to know why you just looked at my phone that way."

Raven looks into my eyes and sighs. "Do you remember that day that Grandma made cookies, and you filmed Sierra and me fighting over them?"

I nod, my dick stirring at the mere thought of that memory. She'd climbed into my arms in an attempt to snatch my phone away, and I'd pushed her against the wall, her body pressed against mine. It was only for a few moments, but I still remember the way she felt against me.

"When I deleted that video, I saw the last photo you took. It was a photo of Hannah, in bed. I don't want to go through your phone because I don't

want to be confronted with any of that."

I wrap my hands around her waist and look up at her pleadingly. "Grace," I remind her. "Will you give me some grace?"

She looks back at me, caught off-guard.

"You didn't do anything wrong, Ares. I'm not… I'm not mad at you. I'm mostly just mad at myself."

I tighten my grip on her and shake my head. "No, baby. You're my wife. It doesn't matter how or why we got married — all that matters is that we're married now. You better believe I'd be pissed as fuck if you were going around calling your ex, so yeah, I did do something wrong. If it's not behavior I'd accept from you, it isn't something I should be doing myself. You and I will need to talk about if and how Hannah is going to be part of our lives, but that isn't something we need to do right now. How about we both think about it, and once you've decided what your boundaries are in relation to Hannah and me, you let me know? Whatever you decide, I will honor."

She stares at me in disbelief. "What if I decide that I never want you to speak to her again?"

I smile at her. "Then I won't. You are my wife, Raven. I will always put you above anyone and everything else. *Always*."

She purses her lips and nods, her expression filled with cautious hope. She doesn't realize it, but she could ask me for the moon and I'd try to give it to her. There's nothing I won't do for her.

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Chapter Thirty-Three

ARES

I scroll through my camera feed, the feeling bittersweet. Hannah always hated taking photos together, so most of them are of her alone. There aren't many of us together, and I can't find a single one of the both of us in which I'm smiling. All of these images look forced, as though I knew she was humoring me by taking a photo with me.

I sigh as I upload all my photos with family and friends to the cloud before navigating to my settings and pausing on the factory reset button. I hesitate for a split second before clicking on it. A fresh start is what I want. It's what Raven and I both need, and in real life, we can't have it. We don't have the luxury of giving each other an honest chance without our baggage weighing us down. I thought it'd be painful to erase a part of my life, but the thought of hurting Raven is more painful. I should've done this long ago.

Things between us have been somewhat odd. We've been pretending that Hannah isn't a factor, and it worked for us, until it didn't. I've hurt her enough. I can't risk anything on my phone upsetting her. Being reminded of my past with Hannah is difficult enough for both of us.

I watch as my phone resets and smile to myself as I type in a new password, choosing a combination of Raven's birthday and our wedding

date. Had I known erasing everything would feel so good, I'd have done it long ago.

Raven walks in to find me grinning at my phone, and her expression falls before she forces a smile onto her face. I watch her carefully as I put my phone down.

"You're home earlier than I expected."

She nods and rubs her shoulder. "I fell on set. My back has been hurting all day, so I figured I'd just work on my designs from home."

I jump to feet and rush up to her. "You're hurt? How did that happen?"

She smiles and shakes her head. "I was just being clumsy. I've been absentminded all day. This honestly really was all my own fault."

I sigh and place my hands on her shoulders, massaging her gently. I don't even need to guess to know what she's been thinking about. I suppose we couldn't avoid this situation. At some point, we were going to have to face Hannah and the past I share with her. I just didn't expect myself to have so much clarity when it finally came round to it.

I sigh as I gently brush her hair out of her face, my hand lingering. She's been so distant lately, and I fucking miss her. I cup her cheek gently and lean in, pressing a soft kiss to her forehead. I haven't dared to kiss her properly since last time, scared that I'm asking for too much, too soon.

"Come on," I tell her. "Take a hot shower to relax your muscles, and then I'll give you a massage."

She hesitates for a moment, but then she nods. She's been especially distant today. Normally, she'd text me at least a handful of times throughout the day, but she hasn't replied to any of my messages. It's like that phone call yesterday made her realize that she and I will never be able to escape the past.

I sigh as I go in search of the oil I know she uses on her body. I need to look into how she got hurt today. I may have to hire a safety coordinator to check every single one of her sets before she gets there.

"Ares?"

I look up to find Raven standing a few steps away, a white towel wrapped around her. "Come here," I tell her, patting the bed. "Lie down."

Raven lies down on her stomach with her towel still wrapped around her, and my heart starts to race. What the fuck was I thinking, offering her a massage? I won't survive having my hands on her body for that long. This was a stupid idea, but that doesn't stop me from reaching for the oil.

I kneel beside her and tug on her towel. “Let me move this aside.”

She nods hesitantly as I move her towel lower, exposing her shoulders and upper back. I pause for a moment before pulling it lower, until it’s bunched around her waist.

I don’t think I’ve ever been quite this nervous about something as simple as a massage. There’s something about her that I find impossible to resist. When is the last time I was this affected by a woman?

My heart races as I pour some oil onto her back. “Are my hands cold?” I ask as I spread the oil over her shoulders, kneading gently.

Raven sighs happily. “No, this is perfect.”

I watch her side profile as I move my hands up, massaging the back of her neck with my thumbs, the tips of my fingers pushing into her scalp.

“Oh God,” she moans. “That’s so good.”

Fucking hell. My cock hardens instantly, and I clench my jaw as I continue to massage her neck, drawing circles with my thumbs as my nails scrape over her scalp.

“Ares,” she moans, and it takes all of me not to turn her over and kiss her. Fuck. The way she says my name is unreal. “I love this.”

“Let me move on top of you,” I tell her, positioning my legs on either side of her so I can use more of my body weight.

She shifts a little underneath me and moves her hands up and out of the way. Damn. Does she realize that she’s giving me a clear view of the side of her breasts? Fucking hell. Thank fuck she can’t tell how hard I am.

I move my hands lower, massaging her shoulders and back, taking my time to ease the tension in her muscles as best as I can. I keep moving slightly down, until my thumbs are pressing into the dimples on her back.

Fuck. I’d love to hold her just like this as I fuck her from behind, my hands on her hips. I have no doubt she’d take my cock like a good girl. I want more of her moans. I want my name on her lips as I push deep inside her.

I hesitate for a moment as I move lower and tug on her towel slightly to check if she’ll resist, but she doesn’t. Instead, she lifts her hips a little, allowing me to pull it off entirely, until I’ve got her lying underneath me naked.

“Don’t stop,” she whispers, snapping me out of my daze. I continue to massage her lower back, unable to tear my eyes off her ass. Her body is

literal perfection. My hands move slowly as I knead the top of her ass, my thumbs working through her glutes.

“Oh,” she moans again. “Hurts.”

“Here, baby?”

I continue to massage her glutes, moving my hands lower, until they’re covering her ass fully, my grip tight as my thumbs dig into her muscles.

“Yeah,” she groans. “There.”

I clench my jaws hard as I move a little lower, my thumbs brushing over her inner thighs, so fucking close to her pussy. I pause for a moment before I move my body down, giving myself a clear view of her smooth pussy.

Fucking hell. I’d give the world to spread her legs and bury my face between them. I need a fucking taste.

I move my hands wider until I’ve got them on the sides of her ass and continue to massage her glutes, my thumbs pressed against her thighs. Raven squirms a little, shifting just a little, until my thumb brushes over her pussy. She opens her legs just a little, allowing my finger to go deeper, until I’m pressing against her clit.

I pause for one single moment and smile when she doesn’t pull away. Slowly, I start to knead her ass, keeping my thumb in place against her clit. My movements are more sensual than therapeutic now, but she doesn’t seem to mind. I steal a glance at her face and smirk at the way she’s blushing, her eyes pressed closed.

My movements are almost imperceptible as I start to draw circles around her clit while I pretend to massage her hips. Her breathing turns into soft panting, and I watch as she bites down on her lower lip, no doubt trying her best to keep in her moans.

I smirk as I press against her clit harder and move my left hand closer, pretending to massage her inner thigh. Her hips move ever so slightly, as though she wants more, and I brush my fingers over her pussy, enjoying the wetness. How long has she been turned on?

I wonder how far she’ll let me take this. Will she let me make her come?

I pull my thumb away and bring it to my lips, sucking down on it. My eyes fall closed as I taste her. I wish I could have more. Fuck, I wish I could make her sit on her hands and knees while I eat her out from behind.

I move my hands away from her pussy and start to massage the back of her thighs, patiently waiting for a sign that she wants more, that I’m not

crossing any lines.

Raven squirms underneath me and repositions herself slightly, until she's got my fingers back on her pussy, and I bite back a smile. Yeah, my darling wife wants more.

"Spread your legs for me," I tell her, my voice rough and demanding. "Let me work on the muscles in your thighs."

I put my hands on her thighs and reposition her legs until I've got her on her knees with her ass in the air, all the while keeping her upper body perfectly unmoved. She keeps her eyes closed, pretending to be unaffected, but her breathing gives her away.

That, and her soaking wet, swollen pussy.

I grin as I grab the oil and pour it down her ass until it's glistening and wet. "Sorry," I murmur. "I think I used too much, baby. Let me clean that up for you."

I let three fingers move down her back, pushing my middle finger into her ass just slightly for a moment as I drag my fingers down. She moans loudly and buries her face into her pillow deeper, her face crimson. She likes that, huh?

I chuckle as I cup her pussy fully, pressing the heel of my hand into her. "I used too much oil," I complain, making excuses for the way I'm touching her.

"It's okay," she whispers. "Just rub it in. My skin will absorb it."

"Yeah?"

I slide my hand underneath her pussy, pretending to check for oil as I slowly drag my fingers back up, pressing against her skin, until two of my fingers slip into her, supposedly accidentally. The way she moans into her pillow is fucking unreal.

"So much oil," I groan, unable to keep the smile off my face.

I finger her slowly, taking my time to find her g-spot. Raven moans my name when I find it, and I increase my pace, using my left hand to stroke her clit while my right hand fucks her pussy the way I wish my cock would. I've never been jealous of my own fucking fingers, yet here I am, watching them disappear into my wife's hungry pussy.

"Ares, *please*."

I smirk as I flick my thumb over her clit, my touch rough. Her hips start to thrust back against my fingers, and *fuck*, I wish I could just slide my cock into her. I want her screaming my name.

“Yeah, baby,” I groan as her breathing comes faster. “Just like that.”

Her muscles tighten around my fingers, and she moans my name. She says it like it’s a fucking prayer, and shit, just the sound of her has me close to coming myself.

I pull my fingers away as she comes down from her high and gently reposition her, so she’s lying flat again. She relaxes underneath me and I continue to massage her legs as though I didn’t just make her come. Considering that she didn’t even look at me once, she might not be ready to speak up about what happened, but that’s fine. The way she just moaned my name is enough for me, for now. It’s a whole lot more than the cold avoidance she’s been giving me lately.

I lean in and press a kiss to her lower back. “You may need to take another shower, Wifey. I got oil all over your body.”

“Yeah,” she whispers. “I, um, I’ll just go take another shower now.”

I kiss her skin again and pull away. “I’ve got a conference call in a few minutes, so just relax for a bit before you shower, my love.” I sigh and lean in one more time, kissing her shoulder blade this time.

I move off her and jump to my feet, taking another quick peek at her as I walk out of our room. The way she’s smiling, part of her face covered behind her arm… yeah, that expression is going to haunt my dreams tonight.

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Chapter Thirty-Four

RAVEN

No matter what I do, I can't get last night out of my mind. The way he touched me… he knew exactly what he was doing to me as he massaged my thighs. What would have happened if I'd just turned around? Would he have taken my body the way I've fantasized he would?

I bite down on my lip as I think back to the way he teased me. He played my body expertly, slowly pushing me further and further while pretending to do nothing but massaging, until I couldn't hold on anymore.

I run a hand through my hair and clench my thighs, trying my best to keep my mind off Ares and failing miserably. With each passing day, I crave him more.

A soft knock sounds on my door, and I look up in surprise. "Raven?" A chill runs down my spine when Hannah walks into my office. "Hi," she says softly. She hesitates for a moment before walking over to the seat in front of my desk. She sits down opposite me and smiles.

"Hi," I repeat, my response delayed.

Hannah looks exhausted and heartbroken, more so than I've ever seen her look before, and it fills me with overwhelming guilt.

"I'm sorry," she says, her voice so soft that I nearly missed it. "I… I should've come to see you sooner, Rave. I haven't been in a good state of mind recently. I guess it took me a bit of time to think everything through,

you know? When I walked away from Ares, I just… I guess I didn't quite realize what I was doing. I'd postponed the wedding so many times, and I'd gotten away with it. I thought it'd be the same this time."

I look down at my lap and inhale deeply. "But it wasn't."

"No," she says. "It wasn't."

I force myself to look up and face her. "I told you, Han. I begged you to reconsider."

"I know. I *know*, Rave. What do you want me to say? That you were right?"

I shake my head and look away. "No, Hannah. Of course not."

"You're mad at me too, aren't you?"

I bite down on my lip and shake my head. "I was, initially. Now? I don't even know how I'm feeling now. I guess I'm just hurt and disappointed. You may have broken Ares's heart, Hannah, but you broke mine too. You didn't listen to any of my concerns and played with my life without any regard for my wishes and dreams. Do you have any idea how used and manipulated I feel? You're my big sister, Han. You're the one person in this world that's supposed to look out for me, yet you never did. *Never*."

"Raven, you know that isn't true. Wasn't I the one who got you your first modeling gig?"

I look her in the eye and smile in disbelief. "No, Hannah. All you did was bring me with you to one of your premieres. I was scouted and signed without any endorsements from you."

She sighs and waves her hand. "You wouldn't have been there without me, but forget it. That isn't the point. I'm just trying to say that I do try to look out for you in my own way."

I shake my head. "Not everything can always be *your way*, Han. You don't get to decide whether I feel like you're there for me."

"So you *are* mad at me." Her tone is accusatory, and I shake my head in defeat. Why do I even bother?

"Why are you here, Hannah?"

She looks around my office and smiles. "The last time I was here, I was trying on my wedding dress. I didn't even get to wear it in the end."

I grit my teeth and look away. Just thinking about her dress is bittersweet to me. I put so much love and work into her wedding gown, yet wearing it brought me so much pain.

Hannah looks at me with an insincere smile on her face. “I bet it looked beautiful on you, though.”

I stare at the design in front of me, unsure how to even reply to that. Just seeing her makes me feel conflicted. It reminds me that every moment I share with Ares should’ve been hers.

“Is he nice to you, Rave? Does he treat you well?”

I look up, hesitating for a moment as I think back to the way he touched me last night. Guilt unlike anything I’ve ever felt before hits me hard, and I look away, suddenly feeling sick.

“I’m worried about you. He’s a good man, but I’m worried he’ll take his anger at me out on you.”

I cross my arms and lean back in my seat. “Ares and I have always been friends,” I tell her, my voice soft. “That hasn’t changed. He’s still as nice to me as he’s always been.”

Something flashes in Hannah’s eyes, but it’s gone before I can identify it. “That’s good. I’m glad.”

She looks away, both of us falling silent for a moment. There’s so much left unsaid between us, but neither of us has the courage to ask the questions that need to be voiced.

“I know that the Windsors value marriage above almost everything else,” she says cautiously. “Ares is no different. There’s nothing he won’t do out of loyalty, regardless of his feelings.”

I frown, unsure what she’s trying to say.

“I know he still loves me, and he always will, but he’s hurting so badly right now that he’s pushing me away. I think that, in part, it’s because he feels like he has to distance himself from me simply because he’s married now. I know he needs me, yet he refuses to let me in because it goes against his beliefs about marriage. I don’t want to see him hurting, Rave. I know he’s mad at me, and I know I caused a great deal of pain. I want to make up for it, but he won’t even take my calls.”

I entwine my fingers and squeeze tightly in an attempt to stay calm, even though my thoughts are racing.

“Please, Rave. Tell him to talk to me. I know my request sounds ridiculous, especially because your marriage isn’t real. You said it yourself, the two of you are just friends, and considering how much he loves me, it’ll never be more than that, but he just… he has such a strong sense of loyalty. Remind him that it’s misplaced.”

I stare at her for a moment as a wave of disappointment and sorrow washes over me. “You aren’t here to apologize for what you did to me, are you? You’re here because you need me to talk to Ares on your behalf.”

She crosses her arms and sighs. “Why can’t I be here to do both, Raven? I love both of you, and honestly, this is in your best interests, too. It can’t be easy for you to be caught between us. Don’t you want things to go back to how they used to be? I’m trying to relieve some of the pressure that this marriage has put on you. I can’t take away the countless social obligations you’ll have now, but I can be there to support you with everything else. With me to rely on, Ares won’t expect too much from you, and you won’t lose so much of your own life. After all, eventually, you’ll have to go back to it, won’t you? You know he doesn’t want you. He broke off your engagement to be with me five years ago, and it’s still me he wants.”

I look into her eyes, my heart breaking as I remember the pain I was put through five years ago. I can’t ever go back to how things used to be. My heart won’t survive seeing them together again. I can’t lose what I’ve got now.

“No,” I tell her, my voice soft. “I won’t talk to Ares for you. He’s not a child, and I’m not a mediator. Don’t ask me for more than I’ve already given you, Hannah, because there’s not much left of me to give.”

Her eyes widen in surprise, as though she didn’t expect me to deny her. I suppose I never have before. I’ve always given into anything she’s asked of me. Always.

But that ends today.

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Chapter Thirty-Five

RAVEN

I sigh as I walk into our home gym in the morning, exhausted and annoyed. Something about that conversation with Hannah didn't sit well with me, and it's ruined my mood ever since.

"Cupcake?"

I look up in surprise as Ares places the weight he was holding on the floor. He smiles at me and walks up to me, his expression searching. "Morning," he says as he lifts his hand, his touch tender as he brushes the back of his hand over my face. "You came to bed so late last night. Did you sleep okay?"

I pull away from him a little, suddenly feeling guilty. My conversation with Hannah is so deeply embedded in my thoughts that I can't outrun it.

With me to rely on, Ares won't expect too much from you, and you won't lose so much of your own life. After all, eventually, you'll have to go back to it, won't you?

I nod at him and force a smile. "Yeah, just had a lot of work to finish," I murmur, lying to him.

I take a step away and walk over to my yoga mat, mindlessly working my way through my stretching routine. I've been so restless all night that I woke up with all kinds of aches.

I inhale deeply as I try my hardest to fight the resignation I feel. Ares won't stay mad at Hannah forever. He never does. Throughout the years, he's always forgiven her no matter what she did. He'll eventually forgive her for leaving him at the altar too, and I don't want to bear witness to it. I don't want to be collateral damage in their story.

I lie back and lift my leg, trying to stretch my hamstrings. I'd been on such a high because of the progress in my relationship with Ares, yet one single conversation with Hannah made me feel guilty for every second I've enjoyed with him. She'll never forgive me. If she finds out what happened between Ares and me, she'll never speak to me again. My relationship with my sister might be rocky, but I don't want to lose her. When she said that I was caught between Ares and her, she was right… just not in the way she thinks.

"Let me help you with that."

Ares kneels in between my legs and moves his hand to my calf, pushing my leg back for me. I watch him for a moment, my heart squeezing painfully. The main reason I never made a move was because I knew that it'd cost me everything, and despite being married, that hasn't changed.

Ares puts my leg over his shoulder and leans into me, his eyes on mine. "You're quiet, Cupcake. Give me a moment of honesty, baby. What are you thinking?"

I place my other leg over his shoulder too, and he leans further forward, pushing my legs toward me. He's so close… I could grab the collar of his t-shirt and kiss him with such ease.

"Hannah came to see me," I tell him, my tone defeated. I look away and inhale shakily. "She wants to talk to you. She says you've been declining her calls."

He clenches his jaw, a frown on his face. "Really now?" I nod, and Ares leans in a little further. "And what would you like me to do? Tell me the truth. What would you have me do, wife?"

I look into his eyes and breathe in deeply. "I don't want your eyes on anyone but me. I want you to be *mine*."

He smiles then, and I can't help but smile in return, relief washing over me. For years, I've been scared to voice my needs, but he makes it so easy. "Give me another moment of honesty, baby. These stretches? Do you ever do them with any other men?"

My eyes widen, and he grits his teeth when I don't immediately answer. "Only with my trainer."

Ares tightens his grip on my calfs for a moment, before his hands move down to my thighs. "You won't ever do them with anyone else, ever again, you hear me?"

"Why?"

His eyes flash, and he lifts my hips up, until he's got my thighs wrapped around his shoulders, his lips a mere inch away from my pussy. "Because you look way too fucking sexy like this, and I won't have anyone else seeing my wife this way."

He leans in and drags his nose across my inner thigh, making me shiver. "No man will be able to sit here, holding you in this position, without wanting a taste of your pussy. You will not do this again, not with anyone but me."

I smile at him as I try to suppress the desire he's making me feel. "Or what?"

Ares narrows his eyes at me and leans in, dragging his nose over my pussy before placing his lips against it. "Do you have any idea how easy it is to take advantage of you in this position? You're a supermodel, baby. Your sessions are one-on-one, aren't they? Just you and your trainer, all alone…"

I nod, and Ares laughs humorlessly. "You can't tell me he's never wanted to do this to you." He presses a kiss against my pussy and then drags his tongue over my yoga pants. "No man can see you lying there, your legs up in the air, without thinking of the way you'd look naked, without wanting a taste of your pussy."

His teeth graze over my yoga pants, and he smirks at me as he moves his hands up. "Promise me you won't do these stretches with anyone else, Rave."

"And if I refuse to make that promise?"

He laughs humorlessly and places both hands on my inner thighs. "You wanna play games with me, baby?"

Before I realize what he's doing, he's ripping my yoga pants right at the crotch. The fabric tears with ease, and Ares growls when he realizes I'm wearing nothing underneath. "Fucking hell," he whispers as he leans in, his eyes on mine as he drags his tongue over my pussy.

"Oh God, Ares…"

He chuckles against my skin before circling my clit with his tongue, teasing me, withholding what I want most. Ares drags his tongue down and pushes into me, fucking my pussy with his mouth, until he's got me panting.

"Ares," I plead.

He pulls away a little and kisses my thigh. "What? What do you want, wife?"

I look into his eyes and bite down on my lip harshly. "You know what I want."

He chuckles as he moves his hand underneath and between my legs, until he's got his thumb brushing over my pussy the way he did when he massaged me. My eyes widen as I'm reminded of the way he slowly pushed me toward an orgasm last time.

"Tell me what you want, Raven. Tell me what you want me to do. Do you want me to fuck your pussy with my tongue? My fingers? Or shall I give you my cock? Do you want to come for me, my love?"

I tighten my legs around his shoulder and push my pussy back into his face, and he smirks as he leans in, giving me what I want. He keeps two fingers pumping into me as his tongue starts to stroke my clit, his movements rhythmic.

"*Yes*," I moan, my eyes never leaving his.

Just as I'm about to come, he pulls away with a smile on his face.

"Ares, no," I plead, trying my hardest to push my hip back up to his face, but he's holding me steady, his grip tight.

"You want more, baby? You want to come for me?"

I nod, restless. "Please, Ares. *Please*. Make me come, my love."

He smiles then. "I'll reward you for calling me *my love*, but you don't get to come unless you swear to me that no other man will ever help you with your stretches." He turns his face in and kisses my thigh, his touch tender. "You want it, don't you? You want to come on my tongue, don't you, baby?"

I look at him and shake my head. "If you make me promise you that, then I want more. I want to promise me something in return. I want you to fuck me."

He groans and runs a hand through his hair. "Gladly. I'll fuck you here and now, Raven. My cock is ready for you. It always is."

I smirk at him, surprised by how comfortable I feel with him. “I swear, Ares. You’re the only man who will ever help me with my stretches.”

He smiles at me before he dives back in, his fingers just as rough as his tongue. Within minutes, he’s got me right back at the edge, his eyes on mine. He looks so sexy as he watches me, on his knees, my legs around his shoulders.

“I can’t…” I bite down on my lip harshly, trying my best not to come just yet, but Ares sucks down on my clit as he pushes his fingers deeper inside me, and just like that, I come on his tongue, my eyes falling closed as the strongest orgasm I’ve ever had washes over me, wave after wave, leaving me breathless.

“Look at you,” he groans. “Ripped yoga pants, a wet pussy, and that satisfied fucking smile on your face. You look like you’re my own personal little slut, baby.”

I bite down on my lip harshly, my cheeks heating. Ares gently puts my legs down on either side of him and places his hands on the waistband of his gray sweats. “I’m not done with you, Wifey.”

“You’d better not be. You promised me you’d fuck me.”

He chuckles as he pushes his sweatpants and boxer shorts down, exposing his thick cock. I bite down on my lip, nervous all of a sudden.

Ares leans over me, holding himself up on his forearm as he uses his free hand to position his cock. “Do you have any idea how many times I’ve dreamed of this, Raven?”

He pushes the tip into me, and I groan, my arms wrapping around his neck. “Go slow,” I plead. “It just… it’s been so long.”

He smiles at me and pushes in just a little further. “You can take it,” he promises me. “You can, baby. Your pussy was made me for me, I just know it.”

I shake my head, and he bites down on his lip as he holds still to give me a chance to adjust. I doubt he realizes how surreal this moment is for me. I’ve wanted him for so long, and here we are.

“Ares! Boss, where are you?” My eyes widen when I hear a voice from the distance that I vaguely recognize.

“Fuck!” Ares shouts. He pushes off me and takes off his t-shirt at lightning speed. Before I even realize what’s going on, he’s pulling my arms through his t-shirt and covering me up as best as he can. He pats my

thighs to ensure my ripped pants are fully covered before he even bothers to pull his sweats up.

Dom walks in a split second later. “Ares! There’s been a change to today’s schedule, and I couldn’t reach you.”

He walks further into the room and sees me hidden behind Ares’s broad back. “Mrs. Windsor,” he says, grinning, his eyes moving between the two of us.

“Dom.” I nod at him.

“Get out, Dom,” Ares snaps, his eyes flashing with anger.

Dom smirks as he follows Ares’s order, pure amusement written all over his face.

Ares runs a hand through his hair and sighs. “I… I need to go, Cupcake.”

I smile at him and nod. “Go.” My voice is soft, reluctant.

“Remember, Raven. I never break a promise.”

I blush as he rises to his feet. “I’ll hold you to it.”

He grins at me as he walks away, pausing by the door. “Don’t forget to meet me at the jeweler’s later. Our appointment is today. I’ll text you the address.”

I nod, butterflies erupting in my stomach. I forgot about our rings. I glance down at my empty ring finger and smile, my heart filled with cautious hope.

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Chapter Thirty-Six

RAVEN

My heart is pounding as I walk into the highly exclusive jewelry store that Ares asked me to meet him at. In all the years that he and I have bought jewelry for Hannah together, he never once bought anything for her here, not even when she pleaded with him, which I know she did. This isn't the kind of store that just anyone can buy from, no matter how much money you have. Their designs are iconic, and they're all handcrafted.

"Mrs. Windsor," the owner of the store greets me, his head bowed. "It's an honor to have you here today."

"Mr. Laurier, the honor is all mine," I reply, surpised.

He shakes his head bashfully, as though he's genuinely happy to have me here, and it leaves me feeling flustered. Throughout my career I've become accustomed to having nearly anything I could possibly want, yet this is one of the few things that has always been out of reach for me.

"Rave." I look up at the sound of Ares's voice and smile when he holds his hand out for me. He entwines our fingers and pulls me into him, his eyes on mine. The way he looks at me reminds me of this morning. Just as Hannah managed to shake my confidence, he stepped in and restored it, showing me how much he wants me. Even if what we've got is nothing more than passion, it's still a start. It's more than I had just a few weeks ago.

“Let’s pick you a ring.”

“Please follow me, Mr. and Mrs. Windsor.” Mr. Laurier leads us to a desk, where he’s got several designs laid out for us. “Do you have anything in mind?”

I glance at Ares nervously as we sit down, but he merely smiles and reaches for my hand, entwining our fingers before he brings our joined hands to his lips. “Anything you want, Raven. There is no budget. I just want you to have a ring you’ll wear with pride.” He looks at Mr. Laurier then. “My only request is that you engrave my name on the inside of my wife’s ring.”

My heart skips a beat as heat rushes to my cheeks. He has no idea how many of my dreams he’s fulfilling today. I hesitate for a moment before I take out my tablet. “I drew something,” I admit. “But I’m not sure if it’d be possible to create this.”

Mr. Laurier smiles as he takes my tablet from me. “We can definitely make this, Mrs. Windsor. It’ll be a shared-prong eternity band with a trellis design. What kind of carat weight were you thinking of?”

Ares tenses and straightens his back, his grip on my hand tightening. “I need it to be visible from across the room,” he says, his expression unyielding. “Would ten carats be okay? Perhaps fifteen.”

My eyes widen, and I turn toward him. “Are you insane? That’s far too much.”

Ares looks at me and shakes his head. “You’re a Windsor. You’re *my wife*. Nothing is too much.”

Mr. Laurier smiles at me reassuringly. “Because this is an eternity ring, there will be several diamonds on your ring with a combined *total* weight of ten carats. I will ensure that the end result looks classy, Mrs. Windsor. I understand your worries, but please rest assured. The final result will be breathtaking and befitting your stature.”

I nod hesitantly, worried for a reason I can’t quite identify. I suppose I’m scared to truly step into my role as Mrs. Windsor. I’m scared that this thing that appears to be growing between Ares and me will fall apart. I’m scared my heart will end up shattered and trampled.

“What’s wrong?” Ares asks, his voice soft.

My eyes drop to his simple platinum wedding ring. He hasn’t taken it off since the day we got married, and that should fill me with relief, but all it does is heighten my anxiety. It’s the ring Hannah chose for him.

“Can I pick a new ring for you, too?” The words leave my lips before I even realize what I’m saying, and shame soon follows. I don’t want to be petty and jealous, but I can’t help myself. I don’t want anything related to our marriage to be tied to her, yet how could it ever be so, when she’s the very reason we got married at all?

Ares looks at his ring and pulls his hand out of mine. For a moment, I’m certain he’ll reject my request, but then he takes off his ring and places it on the table. “Of course,” he says simply. “Choose whatever you’d like.”

I smile nervously as I grab my tablet and scroll to a different design before showing it to Mr. Laurier. “I want a plain, wide yellow gold band for Ares, with a *very* subtle feather engraving all over.”

He grins at me and nods. “A raven’s feather, I assume?”

I nod, my cheeks burning. Ares chuckles as he wraps his arm around my shoulder, his touch tender. “I like it.” He turns toward Mr. Laurier then. “I want my rings within two weeks, and I only want the very best stones you can find for my wife.”

My eyes widen, and I tap his foot with mine. Has he lost his mind? Does he have any idea how long the waiting list for any of Mr. Laurier's designs is? It’s an honor to be here at all, yet here he is, about to get us kicked out.

“Certainly, Mr. Windsor. I will personally deliver them to your home.”

What? I try my hardest to keep the shock off my face, but the way Ares smirks lets me know I failed.

“Let’s go home,” he tells me, offering me his hand. I take it, and Mr. Laurier walks us out, repeatedly thanking us for putting our trust in him.

“You okay?” Ares asks as he leads me to his car. I nod, and he holds the door open for me, a frown on his face. Ares waits until I’m seated before he rushes around the car. I’ve seen him do this for Hannah countless times, and it always made me feel so envious as I sat in the backseat, watching the two of them together. I always hoped to have him to myself one day, yet now that he’s legally mine, it all feels so empty. It feels like I’m on borrowed time. I’m trying so hard not to lose faith, but I can’t get my conversation with Hannah out of my head.

“Raven,” Ares says, turning toward me. He leans over me and grabs my seatbelt, his face so close to mine that a simple turn of my head would have my lips brushing over his. If he really was mine, that’s exactly what I’d do. I’d bury my hands in his hair, and I’d kiss him so hard he’d be dying to get

us to the privacy of our home. But he isn't mine. Not truly. "You've been quiet since we walked out, baby. What's wrong?"

I look up at him, unsure of what to say. "Moment of honesty? I feel guilty," I tell him. "I'm scared of feeling even a single moment of happiness with you because I can't help but fear that it'll all be ripped away from me. Sometimes, I feel like I'm on borrowed time, and though I try to fight that feeling, I can't always escape it."

I avert my gaze and inhale shakily. "I just want what any other woman would want, Ares. I want a happy marriage of my own. I don't want to deprive myself of anything I desire, yet I can't take what I want without hurting others, without—"

Ares leans in and kisses me, cutting me off roughly as his lips take mine with an urgency I didn't expect. A soft moan escapes my lips, and his hand threads through my hair, his grip tight as he forces my lips open. The way he kisses me leaves me breathless and needy for more. More of the way he's making me feel, more of the way he's taking away every single doubt, even if it's just for a moment.

He pulls away and drops his forehead against mine, his breathing as ragged as mine is. "Fuck everyone else, Raven. You're my *wife*. It's my honor and duty to make sure all your needs are met, whatever they might be — I don't care if it's the interior of our home, our wedding rings, or the way we interact with each other. If you want it to change, it'll change. We didn't start off right, but allow me to make amends, baby. This is new to me too, but I don't do things halfheartedly. I'm a Windsor, Raven, and you know as well as I do that marriage means something in the Windsor family. The moment I married you, I became yours. Maybe my heart isn't quite there yet, and maybe it never will be, but everything else is yours. *Only yours*. So take what you want. Ask for anything you want. If it's within my power, I'll give it to you."

"Even if what I'm asking for is your body? Your devotion? *Passion*? What if what I want is everything that used to be *hers*?"

He smiles as he caresses my cheek with the back of his fingers. "I'm *yours*," he repeats. "And there's nothing I'd rather do than make you mine in return."

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Chapter Thirty-Seven

RAVEN

I can barely think straight as Ares pulls up in front of our house, my thoughts ruled by desire and fear in equal parts. His lips felt perfect against mine, and that kiss was everything I've ever wanted. This one was different somehow. It was even better than the memory that sustained my love for him for so many years, yet it wasn't enough. It's odd how much more intimate a single kiss can be, compared to everything else we've done.

Ares seems on edge as he walks around the car, his expression unreadable. He offers me his hand, and I take it hesitantly. Never in a million years did I think we'd find ourselves together in this way, yet part of me feels like we were inevitable.

My fingers curl around his, and he holds onto me tightly as we walk to our front door, an unfamiliar tension filling the air. I'm scared he's already regretting kissing me, or that he only did it because he feels like it's part of his duties as my husband. The way he's been touching me lately… I want it to be real. I know how much he values marriage, and it wouldn't surprise me if he's chosen to put my needs above his because of it. That isn't what I want. I want all of him, truly, fully, and freely given.

If there's even a small chance he'll regret being with me in this way, then I need to back away before it's too late. Before I destroy all we've got.

Ares unlocks our door with his thumb and we walk in, my hand falling out of his as the door closes behind us.

“Ares,” I whisper, my heart aching even as a deep need for him holds me in its clutches. “I have a tendency to overthink things, so communication is really important to me. I’ll drive myself crazy if I keep trying to guess how you feel about me. The last time I made a move, you rejected me and told me you’d never want me, and it’s left my heart bruised and my confidence shaken. Things have changed between us since then, but I need to know that I’m not just an obligation to you. So I’m going to ask you a question, *just once*. If your answer is no, I’ll go to bed and we’ll both pretend nothing ever happened.”

He nods, his expression carrying a hint of intrigue.

“Do you truly want me? If we weren’t married, would you want me?”

He smiles and walks toward me, his stride confident and impatient. His arm wraps around my waist, and he pulls me into him, his lips finding mine with the same urgency he portrayed earlier. Ares groans as he kisses me, his hands moving over my body impatiently. I’m pushed against the wall, and his hand curls around my thigh as he hooks it around his hip.

I’m panting as he pulls his lips off mine to kiss my jaw, before placing them just below my ear, pressing a soft kiss to my neck that makes me shiver. “Is that enough of an answer, Raven? I want you so fucking badly that it hurts.” His teeth graze over my ear, his breathing ragged. “I’ve dreamed of your pussy far more often than I’d dare admit, for far longer than I ever should have.”

His hands move to my waist, and he lifts me up against the wall, my legs wrapping around his hips to support myself. “You feel that, baby? Can you feel how hard you make me? You drive me fucking crazy. You always have.”

One of his hands moves to my ass, and he grips tightly as his lips move back to mine. “Open,” he orders, and I part my lips for him, deepening our kiss. My hands start to roam over his back, up, until I’ve got them buried in his hair, my nails brushing over his scalp, quietly conveying my rising need.

He groans against my mouth and carries me toward the living room, knocking over something in the hallway, but not even the sound of something shattering on the floor pulls us apart. If anything, it just increases his urgency.

Ares's hands move underneath my dress until he's gripping my ass with his bare hands. "Fuck," he moans against my lips. "You have no idea how long I've wanted to do this. I haven't stopped thinking about that massage I gave you. Baby, I've wanted to slip my hands underneath your nightgown for longer than you can imagine. You knew exactly what you were doing to me when you wore that sexy sleepwear for me, didn't you?"

I nod, my cheeks flaming. "I was trying to seduce you, but I guess I'm not very good at it."

He places me on our bed and positions himself between my spread legs. "You're far better at it than I let on, Cupcake. I'm practically always hard around you. You're not the only one that overthinks things, Rave. You're the most important woman in my life, and there's no way I was going to do anything that would upset you. I'd already asked enough of you by making you marry me, and I didn't dare ask for anything else… but that doesn't mean I didn't want it."

He leans in, his lips hovering over mine. "Let me show you what it means to be my wife, Raven."

Ares captures my bottom lip between his teeth, teasing, sucking, until he's finally kissing me again. "You have no idea how many times I've dreamed of your lips, baby."

"Ares," I warn, my voice laced with desire. "*Please*."

He smiles and pulls away a little to look into my eyes. "Tell me what you want."

My hands move to his shirt, and I undo the top button with trembling fingers. "I want you to make my fantasies come true," I whisper. "I want you desperate for me."

He chuckles as I continue to open his shirt. "I'm not sure how much more desperate I can get."

His shirt falls open, and I let my fingers trail over his chest. Ares inhales sharply, as though my touch is affecting him the way I always hoped it would, and it's surreal.

"Raven," he whispers as he tugs at my clothes, both of us impatient. I lift my arms for him, and he takes my dress off, leaving me lying in his bed in nothing but a skimpy, lacy set of underwear. "Fuck. When you do wear panties, you wear some really fucking sexy shit, baby."

Ares leans over me and buries a hand in my hair, tilting my head to expose my neck as he nestles his lips just below my ear, eliciting a shiver

from me. “My love,” he whispers. “I want to find out what you look like with my name on your lips and my cock buried *deep* inside you. Do you know how it killed me to have to pull out when I’d only just gotten the tip in?”

I thread my hands through his hair and tighten my grip. “Then stop teasing me,” I beg.

Ares’s eyes are heated as he reaches for me. “You have no idea how long I’ve wanted you naked in my bed. Each night with you has been torture, baby.” He undoes my bra and inhales sharply as it falls away. “Do you have any idea how many times I’ve replayed that night you sat in my lap? Fuck. It took all of me not to touch you then.”

For a moment, embarrassment rushes through me, but he takes it away with a single kiss. “I want you naked too,” I tell him. “Do you remember that night you told me to take off your pajamas? I was so tempted to take off more than just that, but I didn’t dare to.”

He grins at me and places my hands on his waist. “Undress me, baby.”

I do as he asks with the same impatience he just showed me, and he chuckles as his cock springs free. “My turn,” he growls.

He lays me down and wraps his fingers around the thin scraps of lace I’m still wearing. His eyes are on mine as he tugs it down my legs, exposing my pussy. “Fuck,” he groans. “I don’t think I can wait even a second longer.”

“Nor can I, husband. So come here.”

He groans and settles his cock against me. “Say that again,” he orders.

“What?” I ask as he pushes the tip in. “Husband?”

Ares moans, and I can’t help but giggle. He wipes my smile right off my face as he pushes into me further, giving me what I’ve been dreaming of.

“*Oh, God.*”

He thrusts all the way into me and pauses, his eyes on mine. “Fuck, Raven. This… I’m not sure I can last long when you feel this amazing.”

I bite down on my lip, not daring to admit that it hurts a little. He’s bigger than I remember, and I need a moment to adjust to his size.

“What’s wrong, my love?”

I shake my head and pull him closer, my lips finding his. Ares kisses me as he moves slowly, and I lose myself in him. He pushes up on his forearms and rotates his hips, fucking me slowly, teasingly.

“More,” I moan.

He smirks at me. “I thought you’d never ask, baby.”

He buries one hand in my hair and wraps the other around my throat, his eyes never leaving mine as he pulls almost all the way out, only to push back into me hard.

“Ares,” I whisper.

He responds by taking me harder, his movements rougher. “Look at you,” he tells me, tilting my head to give himself access to my neck. He sucks down on my skin, marking me. “Look at you taking my cock, baby. What a fucking sight.”

He pulls away and slips out of me, earning himself a disappointed groan from me, but he merely smiles as he sits on his knees between my thighs. He grabs my legs and pulls me closer roughly, holding me up at an angle. “I need to see the way your hungry pussy takes my cock, baby. I need to see all of you.”

He grabs his cock and slowly pushes it back into me, his gaze as needy as my pussy is. “Fuck,” he groans.

I have no doubt I look like a mess, my entire body on display for him and my hair spread all over our pillows.

“You’re my every dream come true, Raven.”

He holds onto my hips with one hand as he thrust into me, his other hand making its way between my legs.

“Ares,” I moan when he flicks my clit, but he shows me no mercy. His thumb draws circles in that way he knows drives me crazy, the same way he massaged me, and within seconds, he’s got me at the edge.

“You’re so fucking wet for me, Raven. I want you to come for me with my cock buried deep inside you. I want to watch you unravel for me.”

I bite down on my lip as he increases the pace, taking me harder, his fingers moving quicker. “Ares, I can’t hold on,” I warn him.

“I don’t want you to. Lose control for me, baby. Come for me.”

And I do. My eyes fall closed as my muscles contract, a powerful orgasm washing over me. Knowing he’s watching me makes it that more intense.

“Fucking hell,” he groans, his movements rougher, faster. He bites down on his lip as he comes, just seconds after I did. Knowing I did that to him is unreal.

Ares lowers himself on top of me and nestles his face in my neck, his breathing ragged. “Better than any of my fantasies,” he groans. “I’ve only

just had you, and I already need more.”

I smile as I wrap my arms around him, my heart racing. Ares kisses my neck, over and over again, and for the first time since we got married, I feel a sense of permanence with him. This thing between us… there’s no going back from it.

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Chapter Thirty-Eight

RAVEN

I frown as I scroll through the comments on the last campaign I posted while I walk to the main house. It's a simple photo of me holding a bottle of perfume, but it's got some strange comments. Or rather, the comments are quite ordinary, but the usernames are all extremely weird.

Iwanttokissravensfoot: *is the perfume as sweet as you are?*

Fanofthedimplesonravensback: *I love the way you're smiling in this photo. What will it take for you to look at me the way you look at that bottle of perfume?*

Obsessedwithravenssmile: *I want to be in your photos too, you know? I've never been jealous of a bottle of perfume before, but I am today. You've turned me into a fool.*

Iwanttolickravensknee: *I want to fuck you with nothing but that perfume on, Rave. Just you on our bed, my face between your legs, and the subtle scent of perfume in the air.*

ravenshusband2409: *does that perfume smell like you? If so, I'm buying all available inventory so I can have a part of you when you aren't with me… and so no one else can.*

Ravenisthequeenofcupcakes: *if this was your signature scent, I reckon it'd smells like cupcakes and sunshine.*

ravenismycupcake: *you're so beautiful that it hurts. I'm going to make this photo my phone's background so I get to see you smile at me like that all day.*

Ravenismywifestayaway: *I'm running out of patience. I need everyone to know that you're mine.*

I chuckle as I pull up my messaging app.

Raven: *I think my favorite is the "I want to lick Raven's knee" one. It's... weirdly unique.*

Ares*: is this one of those moments where honesty is required? Because if not, my official statement is… it wasn't me.*

Raven: *That's too bad. There was this one comment that I was quite intrigued by. It was something like: "I want to fuck you with nothing but that perfume on, Rave. Just you on our bed, my face between your legs, and the subtle scent of perfume in the air."*

Raven: *but if it isn't you, then that's too bad. I suppose there's no need for me to bring a bottle of perfume home with me.*

Ares: *It was me. It was all me. All of them. I confess.*

I burst out laughing and shake my head.

"Wow. I can't remember the last time I saw you laugh like that."

I look up to find Sierra smiling at me. She hooks her arm through mine and pulls me along. Grandma called both of us over, and that isn't exactly uncommon, yet I'm nervous about it this time. It's the first time I'm seeing her as Ares's wife. True to her word, she gave us one month to spend together — and not a day more.

"So," Sierra says, wiggling her eyebrows. "How has it been? Did you manage to make my dumb brother fall for you yet?"

I chuckle and shake my head. "It's only been a month, Ser."

She shrugs. "Have you fucked him, at least? That's probably the easiest way to get to his heart."

My cheeks heat as I think back to the way he felt inside me, the way he touched me.

“Oh my god, you have!”

I throw her a warning look. “Do you really want to hear about me sleeping with your *brother*?”

She rolls her eyes. “Hell no. I didn’t ask you for details. I just wanted to know whether you’d done it yet or not. What should we call this? Operation Honey Trap?”

I chuckle and shake my head. “This one is Operation Happily Ever After.”

“Awwww,” she gushes. “I love that. Look at you, Rave, being all romantic and shit. Do you finally get the appeal?”

I shrug. I won’t admit to her that I do. Sierra is the most romantic person I’ve ever met, and if she isn’t working her ass off being a total badass CEO, she’s reading romance novels or watching rom coms. Because of that, she has some insanely high standard that she thinks we should all aspire to. I wonder how long it’ll take her to realize that the fictional men she adores so much are all written by *women*.

“Girls!”

We both smile as grandma holds her arms open for us. “Dibs!” I shout as I make a run for it, rushing into Grandma’s arms before Sierra has a chance to beat me to it. Grandma chuckles and hugs me tightly.

“Ugh,” Sierra groans. “I can’t even call you a grandma snatcher anymore, because she’s your Grandma now too.”

I smirk at her as I pull away from Grandma. She leads us into her living room, and this time, it’s Sierra who dashes forward. She grabs the plate of cookies that was waiting for us, and without hesitating for even a single moment, she empties to plate into her handbag.

I look at her in disbelief. “Are you serious?”

She stares me down, a victorious, smug look on her face. “Yeah. I did what I did.”

Grandma wraps her hand around my waist and leans in to whisper in my ear. “I hid some for you. I’ll send them over later.”

“What was that?” Sierra asks instantly, her eyes narrowed.

I giggle. I can’t help it. Being around Grandma always makes me feel so… free. I wish I felt this way around my own family.

“Come on,” Grandma tells us. She has us sit down, and then she hands each of us a box. “I suppose it’s too early to give you yours, Sierra, but I

know what you're like, and I didn't want you to harass Raven about hers, so you get yours early. Open it."

We both open our boxes and gasp simultaneously. Each box contains a priceless Windsor heirloom jewelry set. They're iconic pieces that are often lent to museums, and I never thought I'd own one myself.

"You, my sweet Raven, will inherit all of the Windsor jewelry. You'll become this family's next matriarch, and there's no one else I'd rather have at the head of this family." She turns to Sierra then. "And you will, no doubt, become the matriarch of the family you'll marry into."

Sierra grins. "Want to give me a clue about who you chose for me?"

Just like the rest of her siblings, Sierra has always known she'd marry someone Grandma chose for her. Unlike her brothers, though, Sierra is not all that opposed to it. Courtesy of her romance novels, I suppose.

"You're not ready," Grandma says. "And I don't think I am either. Do you want to leave Grandma so soon?"

She shakes her head and moves over to sit next to Grandma, her arm looping through her grandmother's. I watch with a full heart as Grandma presses a kiss on top of Sierra's head. This is what I've always wanted — to be part of this family, truly.

"Tell me, Raven. How has marriage been treating you so far?"

"Oh," Sierra says. "I'd say it's treating her *real well*."

I throw her a wide-eyed warning look, but the way Grandma smiles tells me she definitely understood Sierra's insinuation. "It's been good. Thank you for asking, Grandma."

She nods. "You two got one month of no interruptions or family obligations, but your time is up now. You must make a formal announcement, which will result in increased media attention for you. Considering your job, I think you're uniquely equipped to handle that. With it, will also come formal engagements. There will be many events you must attend as a Windsor, even if it's just to make a quick appearance. I know how hard you work, Raven, but your schedule is about to become even busier. I will not even allow you to miss our weekly family dinners going forward, much less anything else. The family's reputation is important, and many of our businesses have thrived because of our network. We must maintain that."

"I know, Grandma," I reassure her. "I'll be fine, I promise. I've attended so many charity events with you that I'm not at all concerned about it."

Grandma nods. “Nor am I. Ares and you make a great couple.”

Grandma hesitates for a moment, as though there’s something she wants to ask, but then she seems to think better of it and shakes her head. “Wear that to the next formal event you attend,” she says, a smile on her face. “It’ll send a strong message to anyone that knows us.”

I stare at the diamond necklace, my stomach fluttering. So far, Ares and I have existed in our own little bubble. What will it be like to walk on his arm, to be widely known as his *wife*?

I bite down on my lip nervously. The first event we’re scheduled to attend together is a movie premiere… in which Hannah was the lead star. I’m not looking forward to it, but I think I’m ready.

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Chapter Thirty-Nine

ARES

I stare at the rings in my hand with the most wicked smile on my face. I felt a sense of dread when Hannah picked our rings, yet merely seeing the rings Raven chose fills me with a sick kind of satisfaction.

I can't wait to see my ring on her finger. It's as big as I wanted it to be. There's no room left for misinterpreting what this ring means. It'll mark her as mine the way I want it to, and I'll gladly wear her feather engraved ring in return.

"Rave?"

I tap my foot impatiently as I sit down on our bed and wait for her to walk out of the shower. I'm half tempted to join her in there, but I can't wait a moment longer to put this ring on her finger. The bathroom is not the place to do it.

When we first got married, I wasn't sure what a relationship between us would look like, and I had no intention of being more than friends with her. When did that change? In a mere few weeks, she's become my wife in every way that matters.

Every night with her is fucking amazing. The way she wants me… it's unreal. I've never been this impatient and desperate before, and I can't get enough of her. I'm half-tempted to skip work so I can keep her in bed the

way I’ve been dreaming of, but unfortunately for me, my wife is far busier than I’ll ever be.

My heart skips a beat when she walks out of the shower in nothing but a skimpy towel. “Fuck,” I groan.

Raven blushes, and the mere sight of her rosy cheeks sends another sharp tug of desire down my body. For far too long, I’d been staying away from her under the guise of wanting to give her space, but in part, it was because I knew I couldn’t resist her. She’s the one woman I never should’ve desired and the only one I’ve ever wanted this desperately.

I rise to my feet and walk up to her, my gaze intent. She smiles as though she knows exactly what she’s doing to me, standing there in that tiny towel, and a soft giggle escapes her lips as she takes a step back, until her back is pressed against the wall.

“It’s ridiculous how beautiful you are,” I murmur, caging her in with my forearms.

Her eyes roam over the suit I’m wearing this morning, and she sighs as she grabs the lapels of my jacket. “It’s unfortunate that you’re hiding my favorite parts of your body.”

She strokes my chest, and I grab her hand, keeping it in place over my heart. “Your favorite parts, huh? If my cock isn’t your favorite part of my body, then I’m not doing my job properly. I promise you that I’m about to remedy that.”

She smiles at me, a hint of wonder in her eyes. I suppose this is as surreal to her as it is to me. We were never meant to be together. We were never meant to be so *perfect* together.

“Allow me to make you another promise, Raven.” I lift her hand and grab the ring she designed, placing it at the tip of her finger before I look into her eyes. “You and I started our marriage under the worst possible circumstances, and even now, it feels like so much stands between us, like the odds are stacked *against* us. I don’t know what our future will hold, Rave, but this much I promise you: throughout our entire marriage, you will be everything to me. I will prioritize you above all else, and I’ll do everything in my power to ensure you’ll never feel like you’ve had to sacrifice anything to marry me. I know the road we’ve chosen to walk isn’t an easy one, but I can’t think of a better partner on this journey.”

Raven smiles at me, her eyes filled with unshed tears. My hands tremble as I push her ring onto her finger. I wasn’t even this nervous when I

proposed to Hannah. That had just been a formality, but this? This is a real moment between us, one I didn't think I'd ever have.

I hand Raven the ring she designed for me with a sheepish smile on my face. "Do you want to put that on me, or should I put it on myself?"

She shakes her head and grabs my hand, placing my ring at the tip of my finger, mimicking my earlier movements. "Ares," she says, her voice trembling. "You were never supposed to be mine, but now that you are, I promise to give this marriage my all. It's been odd for both of us, and I know we're still adjusting to being together. You're right to say that so much is still uncertain, but this much I promise you: for the rest of our lives, I'll be true to you in every way. You'll be everything to me, and I'll do everything within my power to be the best wife you ever could've asked for."

She slides my ring onto my finger, her hand trembling the way mine just did. Our wedding was a farce, but this moment between us? That's as real as it'll ever get.

"Are we really doing this?" she whispers.

I nod and drop my forehead to hers. "We already did, Rave. We've been married for a month now. It's about time we face the facts and work toward a future together."

"Do you truly see a future with me, Ares? When we first got married you… well, you mentioned leaving me in three years. Do you still want to? I need to know. I can't… I don't want to get hurt."

I cup her cheek and look into her eyes, my thumb brushing over her lips. "I will never let you go, Raven. Fuck what I said. I was a fucking moron who didn't realize that he'd struck fucking gold. You're my wife, for better or worse. Only you. For as long as I live."

She sniffs and smiles through the tears that fill her eyes. "Promise me. You told me you never break a promise, so promise me that you'll be mine for the rest of our lives. No matter what."

I drop my forehead to hers and inhale shakily. "I'm yours, Raven Windsor. Forever. I promise."

I pinch her chin and tilt her face toward mine as I lean in, taking her lips in one long, leisurely kiss. Her arms wrap around my shoulders, and I push up against her, deepening our kiss. Fuck. How many times have I fantasized about kissing her when I really shouldn't have? Being able to take her lips so freely is surreal.

“Tomorrow,” I whisper against her lips. “Let’s announce our marriage tomorrow.” I know that announcing our marriage means a lot of additional eyes on us, and it’s bound to make Hannah panic, but fuck it. I need the world to know that she’s mine.

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Chapter Forty

RAVEN

I smile at my phone as I type out the message accompanying the wedding photo I'm about to post. This is the one thing I never thought I'd get to have with Ares, but it's something I've always wanted.

Something has changed between us ever since we got married. There used to be an invisible barrier between us, but it disappeared the moment I walked down that aisle.

This version of him is the one I fell for, so many years ago. He finally feels within reach, and there's no way I'm letting this chance pass me by. I love my sister with all my heart, but I won't sacrifice another moment of my own happiness for her — not when she had it all and *chose* to walk away.

I'm grinning to myself as I post the picture seconds after Ares's announcement goes live. I picked a photo of Ares kissing me on our wedding day, and I have no doubt it'll go viral in no time. Perhaps it's playing dirty, a way of increasing the distance between Hannah and him, but I don't care. I'm done putting others above myself.

Seconds later, the door to my dressing room opens with such force that it slams into the wall, and my agent storms in with a distraught expression on his face. "What the fuck is this?" John asks, his tone panicked. He holds his phone up, showing me the photo I just posted. "You fucking got

married? *Married*? To *Ares Windsor?* You got married to the biggest media mogul in the country and you didn't even tell me? What the fuck, Rave?"

I should've anticipated his reaction, but I've been in a daze in the last couple of weeks, not wanting to step out of the bubble Ares and I were in, too scared I'd wake up and realize it was all a dream.

"Surprise?"

John glares at me, his bright blue eyes flashing with anger and hurt. It hits me straight in the chest, and remorse washes away my nonchalance.

"I'm sorry," I tell him. "It's not that I didn't want to invite you," I promise him. "It's just that the guest list was kept incredibly small. Our families are old friends, and well, my mother curated the guest list on my behalf. I've been so busy with work that I… I'm sorry."

He looks away and shakes his head. "I get it." His tone is in contrast with his words.

How am I supposed to explain that I would have invited him if it *had been* my wedding?

"But I didn't even know you were dating him, Raven. How did that happen? How and why did you hide a relationship with Ares Windsor, of all people?"

This is exactly what I was afraid of. Those that know me well enough to know I've been single for a long time.

I'm spared from having to answer when the door to my dressing room opens. A soft gasp escapes my lips when Ares walks in, surrounded by six bodyguards.

"Raven," he says, walking up to me. His hands wrap around my waist, and he pulls me into him, his lips finding mine. He kisses me as though it's just me and him in this room, taking his time, teasing me until I'm breathless. Then he drops his forehead to mine and inhales deeply. "I love the photo you posted," he murmurs. "I thought you'd pick a general photo of us, or perhaps something from recent years, but there was no ambiguity."

I lean back in his arms to look at him, pure love spreading from my heart. "I'm proud to be your wife," I whisper. "Why wouldn't I want to show you off?"

He leans in, his lips brushing over my ear. "You made my day," he murmurs. "I'll have to reward you later."

Heat rushes to my cheeks, and I pull away from him a little, suddenly self-conscious. It takes me a moment to realize that Ares's bodyguards have

their backs turned to us, but John is staring at us with an expression I can't quite decipher.

Ares takes a step away from me and wraps his hand around my shoulder as he extends his free hand toward John. "I've seen you around, but we've never formally met. I'm Ares Windsor, Raven's husband."

The two men shake hands, and something about the way John stares at Ares doesn't sit well with me. Normally, people in the industry are overly happy to meet him, but John doesn't seem to be.

"I'm also your new boss," he says as he pulls his hand away. "Since this agency is such a good fit for my organisation, I bought it."

I look up at him in shock. "You *what*?"

Ares shrugs and leans in. "I thought it would be good for us to own the company you work for. You can have it, if you want. I'll sign it over to you, on two conditions."

"What conditions?"

He smiles and brushes his lip over my ear. "No more campaigns with other men, and you're no longer allowed to overwork yourself."

I stare at him in disbelief, my lips falling open. "Did you buy my entire modeling agency because you don't like me shooting with men?"

Ares raises his brows. "So what if I did? I'm your husband. The only hands allowed on your body are *mine*. I couldn't ask you to breach any of your existing contracts, so I bought the company and canceled every single contract that required you to be even remotely intimate with another man."

"The penalty to terminate any of my contracts is *millions*, Ares. Are you insane?"

He pauses for a moment and smiles. "My love, I don't think you quite realize that your wedding ring is worth more than the penalty I paid. And either way, it doesn't matter. There's nothing I won't do for you."

John clears his throat, and we both tense as we're suddenly reminded of his presence. "Mr. Windsor," he says, his tone terse. "Raven has a shoot in a couple of minutes. We'll need to head out now."

Ares tightens his grip on me and shakes his head. "It's canceled. I'm taking her home." He turns to me and smiles apologetically. "The media have already swarmed this building, my love." Ares tips his head toward the bodyguard behind him. "They're going to get us home safely. Once we get through the gates of the Windsor estate, we'll be in the clear. Until then, we'll need them." He pauses for a moment. "The next couple of weeks are

going to be tough as the media tries to find out as much as they can about us. We'll both be forced into the spotlight in a way we never have been before. Windsor Media is monitoring all news coverage about us, and I've got my legal team ready to jump in if need be."

I nod and smile at him. "Don't worry. I'm used to dealing with the press," I tell him, even as genuine dread fills by body. I've been lucky so far, flying just below the radar on most days, but as the new Mrs. Windsor, those quiet days are most certainly gone.

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Chapter Forty-One

RAVEN

I sigh as I turn my phone off. It hasn't stopped buzzing since our announcement went live, and though the initial media attention was exciting, it quickly became exhausting. Most gossip pages started to look into our relationship instantly, but needless to say, they haven't been able to find anything. How could they, when our relationship didn't exist before our wedding day?

I'm worried that if they look hard enough, they'll find traces of Hannah and Ares's relationship, and there's no doubt that it'll be shameful for all three of us. I don't want anyone to find out that this thing between us isn't real.

I bite down on my lip as I rummage through our dressing room, needing a distraction. Ares walks out of the bathroom just as I fish my trusty old measuring tape out of one of my boxes. His eyes widen when he sees me bent over, on my hands and knees, and the way he bites down on his lip sends a rush of desire through me. He's in nothing but a white towel that hangs low on his hips, drops of water running down his chest.

"Ares," I say, my voice huskier than I wanted it to be. "Don't get dressed."

His eyes flash with desire, and he smiles wickedly.

I hold up my measuring tape and grin at him. “I want to measure you. I’ve got something in mind that I want to design for our first official event together.”

He lifts his hand to his neck, his gaze heated. “You want to measure me… right now?”

I nod. “Yeah. I prefer to get accurate measurements. It’s not quite the same over clothes, you know?”

“Fine.” He beckons me forward and I approach him nervously. I haven’t taken this much initiative since the last time I tried it. Every time we sleep together, it’s Ares who initiates it. It’s stupid, but part of me is still scared he’d reject me again. Realistically, I know he won’t, but somehow my heart hasn’t healed from the pain he inflicted.

“Lift your arms,” I tell him. My hands tremble as I wrap my measuring tape around his arm, barely thinking straight. I needed a distraction, and I suppose I got one.

I can feel his gaze burning on my skin and look up nervously to find him staring at me, his eyes filled with desire. He’s sexy as sin on the worst of days, but right now, standing here in front of me in just a towel? Delicious.

I place my hand flat against his chest and smile at him. “Do you have any favorite colors?”

He reaches for me and pushes my hair behind my ear, his gaze dipping down to my chest, where it lingers. “Whatever you create for me will be amazing, I’m sure.”

I wrap my measuring tape across his torso and lean in close to read the measurement, brushing my body against his as I do so. Ares inhales sharply and clears his throat uncomfortably, making me smile.

“Oh, I forgot your neck.” I rise to my tiptoes and press my breasts against his chest as I wrap my measuring tape around his neck, my lips brushing over his jaw. He groans softly, and a rush of desire rushes through me when I feel him harden against my stomach.

He raises his hand and threads it through my hair, tightening his grip and keeping me in place. “This is how you take measurements, wife?” he snaps, sounding angry.

I lean back a little to look at him and shake my head. “No. I never do this myself, but I wanted to for *you*.”

“Hmm,” he grunts. “Very well. No one but me, Raven.”

I nod nervously as I let my hand roam down his body. His face is so close to mine… should I give up on this charade and just kiss him? His eyes drop to my lips and I tilt my face, hoping he'll make a move.

"What are you measuring next?" he asks.

I sigh and take a step away, refusing to be discouraged. "Thighs," I tell him as I sink down to my knees in front of him.

I bite back a smile when I see the way his towel is tenting, all because I took some measurements. I look up at him, but he merely stares at me provocatively, without a hint of embarrassment.

I slide my measuring tape underneath his towel, moving it up under the pretence of measuring his upper thigh, purposely dislodging his towel in an attempt to make it fall off.

"Raven," he warns.

I look up innocently. "Is something wrong?"

My hands move over his thighs, touching, teasing, as I pretend that I'm struggling to figure out how best to measure him. His hand moves to my hair just when his towel comes undone, falling to the floor as his cock is exposed, inches from my face. I lean in and bite down on my lip harshly, a thrill running down my spine.

Ares tightens his grip on my hair and forcibly tilts my head toward him. "What are you doing, wife?"

I smile up at him nervously. "Measuring you?"

"Is that all you're doing?"

I glance at his hard cock and grin as I let go of my measuring tape. I lean toward his other thigh, making the tip of his cock brush against my lips as I do so. Ares grits his teeth as desire dances in his eyes, and I clench my thighs in anticipation. "Is there something else you'd rather make me do?"

His free hand moves to his cock and he wraps his fingers around the base. "If I find out you've ever measured another man this way, there'll be hell to pay," he warns.

He grips my hair tightly and moves my face back toward his cock until he's got my lips placed against the tip of it.

I open up for him and let my tongue brush over the edge, eliciting a loud moan from him. "Raven," he groans as he holds my head in place.

I look into his eyes as I close my lips around the tip of his cock, sucking down hard. He watches me as he pushes further into my mouth, slowly.

I moan, and Ares pushes in further, until he hits the back of my throat. Then he pulls back out, only to do it all over again, fucking my face the way I wanted him to.

“Look at you,” he groans. “Look at you taking my cock, baby. You’re such a perfect little slut for me. The whole world thinks you’re this sweet and innocent woman. What would they think if they knew how much you’re loving the way I’m fucking your face?”

He tightens his grip on my hair and thrust into my mouth harder. “Slide your hand down your body, right down to your pussy,” he orders, and I obey. “Are you wet for me, baby?”

I nod, never taking my lips off his cock.

“Finger yourself for me, Raven. I want to see you riding your own hand while I fuck your hot little mouth.”

I suck down on him harder, and he groans, his grip on my hair tightening. “Unless you want me to shoot my cum all the way down your throat, I advise you to ease off, Wifey.”

I chuckle and swirl my tongue around his cock, teasing him further. He might be fucking my face, but he’s at my mercy.

“Fuck, Raven. Baby, your mouth is too fucking good.”

I watch as he unravels, his movements faster, rougher. I love how powerful this makes me feel. I might be the one of my knees, but he’s the one that’s desperate.

Just as I’m sure he’s about to come, loud knocking sounds on the door, and we jump apart, both of us flustered.

“Ares!”

The sound of Hannah’s voice from beyond the door is sobering for both of us, and my stomach twists painfully. I knew our announcement would make her come running, yet part of me hoped she wouldn’t.

“Get dressed,” he says as he rushes through the dressing room, pulling on clothes in a hurry. I stare at him, still on my knees in a dress I didn’t think he could resist. His gaze drops to me, and guilt flashes through his eyes.

He kneels in front of me and cups my face, his eyes on mine. “Raven,” he whispers.

I shake my head and look away. “Just go,” I whisper. “Go to her, like you always do.”

I push away from him and walk toward the bathroom, locking the door behind me before I sink down to the floor, my knees drawn to my chest. It still doesn’t hurt any less. Despite the promises and the sex, he still goes running the moment he hears her voice.

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Chapter Forty-Two

ARES

Go to her, like you always do. Raven's words keep resounding through my mind as I walk into the living room. How do I take away her insecurities? I can't erase the years' worth of memories she has of Hannah and me.

"Ares!"

My blood runs cold at the sound of Hannah's voice, a semblance of guilt settling in the pit of my stomach. She's the woman I've always loved, yet now I can't look at her without thinking of Raven.

"Hannah, what are you doing here?"

She looks up at me with tears in her eyes, her expression portraying genuine heartache as she holds up her phone. "What is this? You *kissed* her?"

I glance at the wedding photo Raven posted of us, remembering the moment vividly. Everything about our wedding was fake, but that moment was real, and it was ours.

A tear rolls down Hannah's cheek and I walk up to her, unsure what to do. She and I have so much history, and I don't want to hurt her unnecessarily.

"Han," I murmur. "Don't cry, please. It was our wedding day, Hannah."

"Why?" she asks, her voice breaking. "Why did you have to make everything between you look so real? Why can't you just tell everyone that

it’s just a marriage of convenience? That it’s nothing more than a business arrangement?”

I hesitate for a moment, wondering how best to handle her. “You know as well as I do that Grandma insists we give our marriage a real chance.”

“Ares,” she pleads. “Please don’t tell me you’re really giving your marriage with her a chance? You two aren’t… you can’t be…”

I’m reminded of the way I pushed my cock into Raven’s mouth just a few moments ago, and guilt hits me hard. I wanted her with such desperation… I don’t think I’ve ever wanted anyone more. Not even Hannah.

“If you do this, you and I can never get back together. Ares, please. Please don’t do anything we can’t recover from. *Please*.”

I stare at her, feeling more conflicted than ever before. I never thought I’d share my life with anyone but her, and even when I married Raven, I thought our marriage would be more of a roommate situation. How did that change so quickly?

“Hannah… she’s my *wife*. You knew exactly what you were doing when you left me at the altar. You walked out on us, so you have no right to tell me what I can or cannot do with the woman I married.”

Her eyes flash with anger, and fresh tears fill her eyes. “Are you sleeping with my sister?” she asks, her voice filled with venom. “Are the two of you going behind my back? I always thought you were weirdly close, but I trusted you. Did you want her all along?”

I stare at her, unsure what to do or say. I don’t want to hurt her, but I can’t lie to her either. Things aren’t as black and white between Raven and me as Hannah would like them to be. “That is, quite frankly, no longer any of your business. You and I can’t be more than friends, and you can’t do this. You can’t drop by my house unannounced and get upset about my wife and me simply being together.”

“*Stop* calling her your wife!” she snaps.

“That’s what she is, Hannah!”

Big, fat tears run down her cheeks, her gaze filled with remorse. Throughout the years, I’ve become immune to Hannah’s tears, yet these tug at my heartstrings.

“Fuck,” I murmur as I cup her face, wiping at her tears with my thumbs. “Han, please… I’m sorry. I just… I’m fucking exhausted too, you know? I

feel like I’m fucking trapped, and no matter what I do, I’ll be letting someone down.”

“Here.” I tense at the sound of Raven’s voice, her tone clipped. *Fuck*. Fuck. *Fuck*!

I take a step away from Hannah to look at my wife, but she’s avoiding my gaze. Her body is tense, and I can’t help but feel like she’s angry. She hands Hannah a handkerchief, and Hannah snatches it out of Raven’s hand angrily.

“How could you!” she yells. “How could you post something like that, Raven? You did that on purpose, you fucking bitch. You’re trying to come between Ares and me, aren’t you?”

Raven steels her spine and stares at her sister. “I’m trying to come between you and… my *husband*?”

Well, fuck.

“Don’t think I never noticed the way you always looked at him, Raven. The only reason I never said anything was because I knew he’d never want you — not when he could have *me*. You know that just as well. Call him your husband all you want, but he’ll never truly be yours. Hell, you could fuck him and it’d still be me he’d love. It’ll always be me.”

“Hannah!” I snap, unable to take the pain in Raven’s eyes.

She smiles at me and shrugs. “It’s true. Can you deny it, Ares? Tell me you no longer love me.”

“You need to leave.”

Her eyes widen in surprise. “*What*?”

“Don’t make me repeat myself. I warned you to respect my marriage, Hannah. After everything you’ve put us through, that’s all I’ve asked of you. You’re forgetting that it’s Raven who paid the price for your choices. She deserves better than this — from both of us.”

Her eyes fill with guilt, and she looks away for a moment. “I just…”

“You need to leave,” I repeat, my tone softer now.

She looks contrite and nods before she turns to Raven, who is staring at the wall, her body tense. “Rave, I’m sorry. You know what I’m like, right? I let my emotions get the best of me, and I was jealous. I know you two wouldn’t do that to me, but I just couldn’t see clearly. I’m sorry, Rave.”

Raven nods, but doesn’t look at her sister. Hannah glances at me apologetically, and I shake my head, silently pleading with her to just leave.

She sighs and walks away, the sound of the door slamming closed following shortly after.

“Raven,” I murmur. “I’m sorry. She shouldn’t have said all that. I think she’s just been having a hard time with everything that’s going on. You know her heart is in the right place, right? She’s just hurting and lashing out.”

Raven looks up at me, and my heart fucking shatters when I see the tears in her eyes. Raven rarely cries. I can count the times I’ve seen her cry on one hand. It’s Hannah who bursts into tears over the smallest matter, but never Raven. A tear drops down her cheek, and my heart clenches painfully.

“Don’t,” she says, her voice trembling. “Don’t defend her like that, Ares. It kills me when you do that, can’t you see? You keep promising me that you’ll give me your all, yet you run out at the sound of her voice.” She runs a hand through her hair, her eyes flashing. “And then you just stand there when she’s telling me that you’ll never be mine — not a single word of denial. How am I supposed to believe your words when your actions say otherwise? It isn’t her I’m concerned about. It’s *you*. You’re making me feel like a part of you truly does still love her, and I can’t stand it. The way you acted just now made me feel like you don’t truly care about me.”

I walk up to her and grab her shoulders, a sense of desperation washing over me. I’ve never felt such intense need to take away someone’s pain. “Raven, you know that I don’t love her.” I tighten my grip on her. “And of course I care about you. You meant the world to me before we even got married, Raven. You’ve always been one of my closest friends.”

She looks up sharply, her torment mixing with anger. “Did you see me as a friend when you fucked my face just now, Ares?”

“Fuck, Raven. You know that’s not what I meant.”

She pushes against me and walks away, pausing by the door. “You said you feel trapped in this marriage, but how do you think I feel? I was forced to marry someone I’ll never stand a chance with — someone who will never even be able to look at me without thinking of my *sister*. Have you ever stopped to think about what I might have wanted out of a marriage? I want happiness too, Ares. I can see now that *you* will never give me that, no matter what I do. I’ll never be her. When given a choice between hurting either of us, it’s always me you’ll choose. I’ll never be your priority, not truly.”

She grits her teeth as another tear runs down her beautiful face, and then she walks out, the door falling closed behind her softly. Raven has always been a quiet storm, unexpected yet powerful, and despite what she might think, I never stood a chance against her.

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Chapter Forty-Three

RAVEN

"You haven't been yourself today," John says. "Your facial expressions were off during your shoot this morning. Are you sure you're fine to walk this show?"

I nod as I play with the hem of my robe. All day, my thoughts have been on Ares's words. Hearing him say that he felt trapped broke my heart. This situation isn't ideal for either of us, but I thought that… I thought he started to have feelings for me, but now I'm not so sure.

When he took me to Castello Designs and then to Laurier, I thought that was progress for us. Now I'm wondering if Hannah was right, and he was only trying to do right by me. What Ares considers the right thing to do isn't the same as what his heart desires.

"Yeah, I'm fine," I say, trying my best to clear my mind and knowing I won't be able to. I'm filled with heartache, shame and regret. Each time I think of the way I measured his body, the outfits I've been wearing around the house… damn it. Maybe I should've believed him that day I sat in his lap, when he told me that he'd never truly want me. I can get his body to react to me, but he'll never want me the way he wants Hannah. The memories of everything I've done and tried disgust me. I've never been this person. I've never forced my affection on anyone else, yet that's exactly

what I've been doing to Ares. Hope made me courageous to the point that I sacrificed my dignity, and what for?

"You're not fine, Raven." John places a hand on my shoulder and looks at me with genuine concern in his eyes. "Are you overwhelmed with work? Have I been scheduling too much in for you? Or is it something else… is it Windsor? He's given us complete control over your schedule with just a few caveats, but you need to tell me if he's pressuring you in private."

I look into his eyes, unsure what to even say. It's been a really long time since I wanted to rely on someone. The urge to ask him for a hug and cry until my heart stops aching nearly overwhelms me.

"I just didn't sleep well," I say eventually, dragging my gaze down as I undo the knot on my robe, letting it fall open. The designer should be in any minute now to dress me.

"Are you okay, Rave? I'm worried about you. Did Ares Windsor do something to you?"

I force a smile for him and shake my head. "We had an argument, but that's all it was. I suppose that's just what marriage is like, right? It can't always be perfect."

John starts to speak but is interrupted when the door opens. We both turn around, expecting the designer to walk in with the gown I'm supposed to wear, but instead, it's Ares. He pauses when his eyes land on me, the bags underneath his eyes identical to mine.

Ares's eyes trail down to my exposed chest, and pure rage settles in his eyes. He walks toward me and slips out of his jacket, his stride confident yet rushed. "Raven," he says, my name sounding like a warning as he wraps his jacket around my shoulders and pulls me toward him.

He glances at John and grits his teeth. "Excuse us, please. I need a moment with my wife."

John looks at me, and I nod. He hesitates for a moment, but then he walks away, the door falling closed behind him.

"Raven," he repeats, his tone softer now. "What was that? Why are you… you're half-naked in front of *him*. Is there something going on between you two?"

I look into his eyes, my heart heavy. I've loved him for as long as I can remember, yet even though I'm married to him, my sister is still standing between us. "Does it matter?"

His gaze hardens, and he pulls me closer. “Of course it does. We promised each other fidelity when we got married, Raven.”

I put my arms around his shoulder, his jacket falling to the floor in the process, leaving me standing in front of him in nothing but an open robe. “I didn’t cheat on you, Ares. I’d never do that. I’m not that kind of person.”

He looks into my eyes as though he’s trying to ascertain my truthfulness. “Do you two have history?”

I look away and huff involuntarily. “Nothing like what you share with Hannah.”

His hands move around my waist, and he tightens his grip. “Rave,” he whispers, his forehead falling to mine. Ares inhales shakily and my heart wavers. “I’m sorry about yesterday. I really am.”

I push away from him, but he refuses to let me go. “Listen to me,” he pleads. “You’ve been ignoring my calls all day. I can’t take this, baby. This is not what I want our marriage to be like, okay? Didn’t we promise to communicate? Our situation is already so unconventional… the last thing I want to do is complicate it any further. Listen to me, *please*.”

I nod at him. “Fine,” I whisper, uncertain anything he has to say will diminish my pain.

“She never should have come to our home, and I never should’ve said what I did. I don’t feel trapped, Raven. Not with you. The situation is tricky, and I feel like I’m either hurting Hannah or I’m hurting you. That’s all I meant. I didn’t for a single second mean that I feel trapped in this marriage with *you*, you hear me? I’ve never been happier, Rave. I just know that hurting Hannah will put additional strain on your relationship with her, too. I don’t want to be the reason you argue with your sister, baby. I just… I just want you to be happy.”

I nod, unsure what to make of his words. “I get it, Ares. I’m just not sure that it matters. What are we even doing?”

“You told me you want happiness of your own, and I swear that I’ll try my best to give you that, if you’ll give me a chance. Will you, Raven? Will you give me a chance?”

My heart skips a beat as my eyes find his, nothing but sincerity in his gaze. “What does that mean, Ares?”

He cups my face, his thumb brushing over my lip gently. “It means that I want more than just your body. I want a chance to prove that I truly do want it all with you, the past be damned. I want a chance to win your heart,”

he whispers. “Because with each passing day, you’re stealing a little bit more of mine.”

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Chapter Forty-Four

ARES

I glance down at my phone, ignoring Hannah's text messages as I walk into my house. Ever since I asked her to leave, she's been texting me incessantly, wanting to see me and talk things through. I suppose she's finally realized that things truly are over between me and her.

I wonder what she was thinking. Did she truly believe nothing would change between us, even though I married Raven? I wouldn't put it past her. She's always been self-centered, but I just never realized it before. Or perhaps I did, and I just chose to ignore it.

I pause in the doorway to the living room, my gaze dropping to Raven. She's sitting on the sofa with her tablet perched on her knee, drawing something that I'm sure is nothing short of magical. Fuck. She truly is fucking beautiful, and those nightgowns she loves to wear are pure torture. She's wearing a red one tonight, and it contrasts with her skin beautifully.

There was something in her eyes when she told me that she never even stood a chance with me, something I don't dare define, yet it set my heart ablaze. I have a feeling my wife knows exactly what she's doing to me. This thing between us… it's always been there.

I walk into the living room, and she looks up, her lips tipping up into a smile. Her gaze roams over my body leisurely and I bite back a grin. I love how she's taken to blatantly checking me out.

“You’re home.”

I nod as I sit down next to her, stealing a glance at what she’s drawing. She’s so insanely talented, and I can’t wait to see what she’ll accomplish.

“How was your day?” I ask, my voice soft. I’ve never had this with Hannah. She and I have never really sat together, just chatting about our days. I don’t think I’ve ever truly wanted to know what she’d been up to either — asking had just become a formality. It’s different with Raven. I want to know what makes her tick, what inspires her. I want to hear about every little thing that made her smile throughout her day. It’s strange.

“Today’s shoot ran much longer than I expected, so all of my meetings ran late. I’m happy about the way my new collection is coming together, though. I’m lining up some of my friends to model for me. The marketing campaign I’ve got in mind is going to be amazing.”

I loosen my tie a little, hoping she’ll lean in and pull it off for me. Her eyes follow my hands, but she doesn’t move toward me. Raven has been distant with me lately, and I’m surprised by how much I miss her playfulness. I only have myself to blame for it. I never should’ve said what I did.

“How was your day?” she asks as she turns back to her tablet, continuing to draw. I’ll never get used to her asking that question. Hannah never asked. All we’d ever talk about was her work or our wedding. The only times she’d ask me about my day was when I was working on something for her.

I watch her draw as I tell her about the boring meetings I’ve had and the work I’ve put in for the merger. She glances up at me every once in a while, nodding along to my stories.

It’s such a peaceful evening. I never knew I craved this at all. I move closer to Raven, until her thigh brushes against mine. This nightgown of hers doesn’t cover up anything at all, and her body is a thing of beauty.

Raven looks up at me, her eyes widening when she realizes how close I am. Her gaze drops to my lips, but then she moves away from me, putting some distance between us. Ever since Hannah showed up at our house, upset about our wedding photos, she’s been distant. It’s like weeks’ worth of progress between us disappeared.

I rise to my feet with a sigh, lost in thought as I make my way to our dressing room. My eyes land on a pair of gray sweatpants and my mind turns back to that night Raven sat in my lap, telling me how much she likes

me in them. I grin to myself as I take off my suit and put on my sweatpants instead, leaving my torso bare.

When I asked her if she'd give me a chance, she said she would… but she hasn't. She's been on guard, scared to get hurt. I can't take away all her fears at once — only time can do that. I can, however, prove how much I want her.

She looks up from her tablet when I walk into the living room and then does a double take, her eyes widening as her gaze remains glued to my sweats. Fucking hell. Perhaps this was a bad call after all. If she keeps looking at me like that, I'll be the one getting seduced.

Raven snaps out of it when I sit down next to her, her cheeks beautifully rosy. There's something so innocent about her, and I love it.

"Show me what you're working on," I tell her, leaning into her, my chin brushing over her shoulder. I smirk as I slide my arm around her waist, pulling her closer.

"Ares," she whispers.

I bite back a smile and look at her innocently. "Hey, do you think you could draw me?"

"Draw you?"

I nod at her tablet. "Yeah. Can you?"

She blushes, but then she nods.

I wrap my hands around her waist, lifting her up, until I've got her straddling me the way she did that night. If I could do that night all over again, I'd give her what she wanted.

"Ares!"

I smirk and tighten my grip on her waist. "Draw me a portrait, Rave. I want to see what I look like in your eyes."

"I don't need to be in your lap for that."

I suppress a smile and shrug. "It'll be easier for you to see the contours of my face." *The contours of my face?* What kind of bullshit has she got me spouting now?

Raven nods and repositions herself, moving further away, until her ass is perched on my knees. She grabs her tablet and glances at me, her cheeks stained pink. She looks so fucking beautiful sitting there like that, her legs spread so I can see her matching red underwear, that long hair of hers flowing down her body. Fuck. My cock hardens at the mere sight of her, and these sweatpants are doing nothing to hide my desire.

I stare at my wife as she focuses on my face, drawing intently while I allow my eyes to peruse her body. She's utter perfection, and it isn't just her body. It's everything about her. What would it be like if she and I truly gave this marriage a chance? Until she uttered those words, it never even occurred to me that we truly could, that she might genuinely want that with me. All along, she seems to have felt like she doesn't stand a chance with me, when it's me who's unworthy of her.

I let my hands slide down her waist, to her ass, my fingers kneading, teasing. Her lips fall open and she looks into my eyes, disarmed. Something flickers through her eyes, and I smile when I recognize it as *desire*.

Raven's gaze roams over my body, pausing on my hard cock. I'm not sure what I expected, but seeing hurt flash through her eyes wasn't it.

"Moment of honesty," she whispers. "Being in this position reminds me of the way I sat in your lap when I got drunk, and all I can think of is you telling me you'd never want me. I don't think I ever told you this, but hearing you say that truly broke my heart. That memory still haunts me, and even though things are different between us now, my heart still aches each time I think of it. Every once in a while, I find myself wondering if that was the truth, and everything we've got is built on a lie."

Fuck. I should've known that my lies that night would come back to haunt me.

I inhale deeply and pull her tablet out of her hand, throwing it on the sofa. "Will you let me tell you a secret, Rave?"

She nods hesitantly.

"Dozens of women have sat in my lap throughout the years, for one reason or another, often unsolicited. You're the only one I've ever reacted to in this way. It isn't a natural reaction, baby. It's a reaction to you, specifically. I just couldn't admit that last time, so I lied. To both you and myself."

I cup her face gently, my thumb brushing over her lip. "Let me tell you another secret, wife. I find you fucking irresistible. The things I want to do to you… *fuck*."

She looks at me with such disbelief in her eyes that I can't help but want to take it all away. I grab her ass tightly and pull her flush against me, until she's sitting right on top of my cock, our positions exactly the same as back then.

“Do you have any idea how badly I wanted to fuck you that night, Rave? You’re the most beautiful woman I’ve ever seen, and you were sitting in my lap, *naked*. You were mine for the taking, your pussy bare and your breasts pressed against my chest. Do you know how many times I’ve replayed that night in my mind?”

I rotate my hips, pressing my cock against her. “In my fantasies, you’re riding my cock, your tits bouncing as you take all of me, my name on your lips.”

I slip one hand into her hair and pull her closer, my lips brushing against hers. “Even back then, you were all I wanted,” I whisper, before kissing her. I tighten my grip on her hair, and she moans, rotating her hips in my lap. She drives me fucking mad.

I move my hand down her body, until the tips of my fingers trace over the lace that covers her pussy. She moans into my mouth, and I chuckle as I push the fabric aside.

“Wet,” I groan. “You’re always so wet for me, baby. I love that about you.” I slip a finger into her while my thumb presses against her clit, and she kisses me harder. The way she moves her hips… fuck. She’s riding my fucking hand the way I want her to ride my cock.

“Ares,” she moans. “I need you.”

I smirk as I push my sweats down, exposing my cock. “Then take what you want, baby. I’m yours.”

She lifts herself up and grabs my cock, her eyes on mine as she sinks down on me. I grit my teeth and wrap my hand around the back of her neck as my cock disappears into her pussy.

“I’m fucking obsessed with you,” I admit. “I’m addicted, Raven. Every touch, every kiss. Every single thing you do hooks me more. You’re a habit I never want to kick.”

She rotates her hips, and I push against her clit harder, making sure my fingers brush past with every move she makes. The closer she gets me, the closer to an orgasm she brings herself.

“Promise me, Ares. Promise me that you’ll always be mine.”

I grab her hair and pull her closer, my lips brushing against hers. “I’m yours, Raven Windsor. Forever. I promise.”

She smiles against my lips and rides my cock harder, making my every fantasy come true. “You’re a fucking vision,” I groan. Watching her ride

me, her hair all messy and her lips swollen from my kisses. Fucking hell. I could come just at the sight of her.

“My wife,” I whisper as I thrust into her, meeting her halfway. Her lips find mine as I take her harder, and she moans into my mouth. I’ll never tire of watching her get closer and closer for me.

“Ares,” she moans, just as her muscles contract around my cock. She comes for me, and she takes me right along with her.

“Fuck,” I groan against her lips, coming deep inside her. I’ll never get enough of her. “Raven,” I whisper. “You’re it for me.”

She pulls away a little to look at me, a sweet smile on her face. She cups my cheek and presses a kiss to the tip of my nose, making me chuckle. She does the cutest things sometimes, and damn if it doesn’t make me fall even harder. “You’ve always been the one for me, Ares Windsor.”

I look into my wife’s eyes, happier than I’ve ever been before. She’s everything I’ve ever wanted, and I’m going to make sure she never doubts it.

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Chapter Forty-Five

ARES

I lean back in my chair and grin to myself as I think about Raven's sleepy smile as I left her in bed this morning. She looked so beautiful and satiated. I'll never get enough of that smile. I'm pretty sure it's seared in my mind for the rest of our lives. I'm making it my personal mission to replicate it every single day from now on, starting right now.

I grab my phone with a wicked smirk on my face, my heart thumping a little faster, a little louder. No one but her has ever had that effect on me. I've never felt so giddy over something so small.

Ares: *I miss you already, Cupcake.*

I hesitate for a moment before I send her the photo I secretly took of her this morning. Her eyes are closed and her hair is spread all over our pillows, her shoulders visible above the sheets. There's a hint of a smile on her face, and something about it seems so perfectly intimate.

Ares: *Last night was amazing, but is it crazy that I genuinely believe nothing will ever top waking up with you in my arms?*

"Ares?"

I look up at my secretary, mildly annoyed I got caught grinning at my phone like some sappy teenager. For fuck's sake. "What is it?" I snap.

Dom shoots me a tense smile. "Hannah is here to see you."

Hannah? What the hell is she doing here? I haven't spoken to her since she came to our house, and a hint of guilt settles deep in my stomach. Sleeping with Raven marked the end for Hannah and me. Forever. But then again, we were over long before Raven walked down that aisle. Part of me knew that, but does she?

"Tell her to leave."

Dom hesitates. "She's says she's here to discuss the merger."

I lean back in my seat and sigh as I stare up at the ceiling. "That's bullshit. Her mother has been handling the merger, and there's no way she'd relinquish control to either of her daughters. Not until she formally signs away her shares. Get one of the board members to deal with Hannah. It doesn't necessarily need to be me she speaks to. You can join their meeting and report back to me. From now on, please minimize my interactions with her if they aren't strictly necessary."

Dom nods and turns around, but the door opens before he even reaches it. Hannah walks in, her signature movie star smile on her face. Not too long ago, that smile would've made me grin at her in return. Now, it just makes me miss Raven's genuine little smiles, her giggles, her authenticity.

"Ares," she says, walking up to me.

I sigh and dismiss Dom with a head gesture. He throws a reassuring smile my way before he bolts out the door, deserting me.

"Hannah," I say, my tone clipped. "What brings you here today?"

She rolls her eyes and walks around my desk, leaning against the edge of it. "Don't be like that," she pleads, her tone playful. "You aren't still mad at me, are you?"

I shake my head. "If you aren't here to discuss business, I need to ask you to leave."

"Ares." The remorse in her voice makes me look up, and I instantly feel myself waver when my eyes meet hers. She looks so hurt, so dejected.

"Hannah," I murmur. "It isn't my intention to hurt you, but I made my boundaries very clear. Things will never be the same again between you and I. There's no going back to what we used to have, and we both know it. We've been in denial, pretending three years would pass and we could just act like they didn't happen at all, picking back up where we left off… but that's not how this works. It isn't that simple. You're nothing more than my wife's sister, Han. You'll never be more than that. Not ever again."

The torment in her expression hits me right in the heart. Tears fill her eyes, and I look away.

“Ares,” she pleads. “Don’t say that. It’s always been you and me, from the very start. This is just a detour. You’re confused because you’re living with Raven. The whole world is seeing this fairytale romance that just doesn’t exist. History like ours isn’t replaceable, Ares.”

She wipes away her tears, but they won’t stop falling. It’s been years, yet despite our *history*, I still can’t tell if any of her tears are real. They don’t hit me the same way Raven’s do.

“Last time I asked, you refused to answer when I asked if you’re sleeping with my sister.”

I freeze, genuine guilt and shame fighting for dominance over my thoughts. Fuck.

“Are you, Ares?”

I look into her eyes. “Yes,” I say simply. There’s no point in hiding it. I can’t allow her to hang onto even a single shred of hope. Doing so would hurt my wife, and I can’t let that happen.

Hannah’s eyes widen a fraction, and something about her expression genuinely guts me. Perhaps none of the tears she’s shed so far have been real, but these most certainly are.

“W-what?”

I look away, unable to provide her with the consolation she needs from me. I can’t encourage continuous blurring of the lines between us. It isn’t fair to Raven, but it isn’t fair to Hannah either.

“I’m sorry, Hannah. She’s my *wife*.”

She buries her face in her hands, loud sobs tearing through her throat as she falls apart. Once upon a time, I would’ve been the one to catch her, to hold her. Part of me still wants to do that for her — on account of our shared past, perhaps, but a larger part of me knows that this must end here.

“H-how could you?” The way her voice trembles and catches on the last word is a testament of her devastation, and it kills me that I did this to her. Despite that, I’d rather see tears in her eyes instead of my wife’s.

“Hannah, I’m sorry. You and I both knew we were over the moment you got onto that flight. You knew what the consequences would be, but you were self-centered enough to think you’d get away with it. Yes, it fucking kills me to watch you fall apart, but do you know what hurts even more? The fact that you walked away from everything we could’ve had. The fact

that you're here in my office now, clinging onto something you forced me to let go of. You did this. You destroyed three lives with your actions, and now you're mad that Raven and I managed to build something with the broken pieces? How is that fair, Han? How is it fair to me? To her?"

She looks at me, and it's as though she's finally really seeing me, *hearing* me. "Ares," she pleads. "I can't lose you."

I look away and stare out the window instead, my heart hollow. "You already did, Hannah."

She reaches for me and wraps her hand around my arm. "I fucked up." Her voice breaks. "I fucked up, and I hurt you. I know I did. Please, Ares. I… tell me what to do. Tell me how to salvage what we had. I'll do anything if it'll prove to you how much I love you."

I shake my head. "There's one thing I need you to do for me, Han."

She looks up at me, her eyes sparkling with a hint of hope.

"I need you to move on."

She inhales sharply, fresh tears filling her eyes. "You're confused," she says, a vicious streak flashing through her eyes. "Pussy-whipped, perhaps. It's been forever since you had anyone but me, after all. I get it, I do. I can overlook discretions, Ares. I see it around me all the time. I can forgive you for anything, even if she's my *sister*. I'll let it go. Fuck her for three years straight if you want to, so long as you come back to me. That's all I ask, Ares. Just come back to me, *please*."

I rise to my feet and take a step away. "I need you to leave, Hannah. It's what you do best, after all."

She freezes, seemingly in shock. I suppose I've never spoken even remotely harshly to her. I've always known I'd marry her and instantly gave into her, no matter what she wanted or did. I always kept the peace between us. Perhaps that is what made her so convinced she could walk all over Raven and me the way she did. I'm done indulging her.

"No?" I ask when she stares at me motionlessly. "Then for once, you'll watch me walk out on you. On us. Forever."

I inhale deeply and walk away, letting my office door slam closed behind me.

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Chapter Forty-Six

RAVEN

Ares tightens his grip on my hand as our limousine approaches the theater that Hannah's latest movie is being screened at. This is the first time all three of us will be present at such a public event, and it's the first event we're attending as a married couple. There's so much pressure, and so much could go wrong. So far, we've been safe from the media's attention in large part, but we can't escape them tonight.

We can't escape Hannah.

"Cupcake," Ares says as he raises my hand to his lips. "How do you feel?"

I turn to look at him and shake my head. "Nervous."

He nods in understanding and kisses the back of my hand. "You look stunning tonight," he murmurs as his eyes roam over the red evening gown I'm wearing. It's figure-hugging, with a deep V. It's eye-catching yet classy, and it is by far one of my favorite designs to date.

"Raven, it's going to be okay. I won't leave your side, and if it all becomes too much, we'll just go home."

I nod, trying my hardest to calm my nerves. I stopped attending these events with Hannah years ago, but I still remember how they go. I remember all the photos Ares takes with the cast, with *her*. I always hated how intimate they looked and how she'd lean into him, his hand wrapped

tightly around her waist. He'd look at her like she was the only girl in the room, and she'd smile at him like the star she is. It hurt to see them together then, but it'll hurt even more now.

"We're here," he says, a sweet smile on his face. "I can't wait to show you off to the entire world, Mrs. Windsor. I'm about to walk down the red carpet, my hand in yours, and there will be no doubt about who you are and what you mean to me, you hear me? There is only one Mrs. Windsor, Raven, and it's you."

I nod at him, grateful for his attempts to take the edge off my nerves. I never even have to tell him about my insecurities. He realizes and takes them away before I even have a chance to voice them.

The bodyguard in the front seat looks back with an apologetic smile on his face. "I've just been informed to wait for a moment. Hannah Du Pont is about to make her entrance."

Ares chuckles darkly. "I don't wait for anyone but my wife," he says. "Inform the organizers that we'll be making our entrance *now*." Then he looks at me and smirks. "Come on, let's go steal the show."

He steps out of the car without a second thought, and cameras start to flash, blinding me straight through the car's tinted windows. Ares walks around the car and opens my door for me, offering me his hand with a wicked smile on his face.

I place my hand in his and smile up at him. "This," he tells me as he helps me to my feet. "This is what I've always wanted, Raven. It's you. You're the one that's made all of my dreams come true."

I smile and shake my head. "You're trying extra hard to reassure me. Are my insecurities that apparent?"

We walk down the red carpet as cameras flash, the crowd throwing questions at us that we ignore.

"No," Ares tells me. "Not to anyone but me. You look confident and radiant, as always, but I can see beyond it. I see the way you keep touching your wedding ring, the moments of absentmindedness as doubts steal your attention away from me. I notice every little thing about you, Raven. I can assure you, my darling wife, you don't have a single thing to worry about."

I nod, my nerves put to ease as we reach the end of the red carpet, where a select few reporters and photographers await us. Ares and I approach the flower backdrop that's been put in place for the event, and his hand wraps around my waist, his touch possessive.

“Congratulations on your marriage,” one of the reporters says. “It came as a huge surprise to many of us. How have you been able to hide your relationship so well?”

Ares smiles at me for a moment before turning toward her. “Did we hide it? Or did you just fail to notice it? My wife and my sister have been best friends since they were kids, so she’s been at the Windsor mansion at least once a week for years. She’s been at every single major Windsor event throughout the years too, and she’s often been spotted with my grandmother, hasn’t she? You just failed to connect the dots.”

The reporter looks flustered, and she clears her throat before moving on the next question.

“That diamond necklace you’re wearing, Raven. Isn’t that a Windsor heirloom? It’s said that it was crafted by the Laurier family hundreds of years ago.”

I lift my hand to my necklace and smile. “That’s right. Ares’s grandmother gave it to me.”

The reporter chuckles. “It’s said that seeing a Windsor bride wearing an heirloom piece signifies the matriarch’s approval. Would you say that’s true?”

I chuckle and narrow my eyes at her playfully. She knows as well as I do that the Windsors guard their family secrets heavily. “All I have to say is that I’ve always loved Ares’s grandmother like she is my own, and I’m beyond grateful to receive her love in return. We had a great relationship long before I married Ares.”

She nods at my non-answer and turns to Ares. “Could you tell us, Mr. Windsor? What is it about Raven that made you fall for her, other than her obvious good looks?”

He looks at me with the most besotted smile on his face, and my heart starts to race as he turns back to her, his smile as wide as mine. “She’s the smartest, sweetest, most loyal and most hardworking woman I know. She has never once let me down, and she’s always been there for me throughout the years, no matter what I asked of her. Raven isn’t just my wife. She’s everything to me. She might be my sister’s best friend, but she’s mine, too. I fell for her heart before I ever fell for any other part of her.”

The reporter looks as smitten as I probably do, and she’s smiling gleefully as she turns to me. “What about you, Raven? What is it that you love about Ares Windsor?”

I grin at her and shrug. “Me? Oh, I totally just married him for his good looks.”

Ares and she both burst out laughing, and he shakes his head at me. “Talking about good looks,” he says. “What do you think of my wife’s dress? She designed it herself. She designed my suit for me, too.”

The reporter takes his cue and starts to ask about my company, and I can’t help but giggle. He’s so blatant about the way he’s promoting my company for me. It’s ridiculous, but it’s so incredibly cute.

“Ares, Raven!”

We both tense when we hear Hannah’s voice behind us. She smiles brightly as she walks up to us, her smile wavering for a moment when she sees the way Ares is holding me. Her eyes settle on my necklace, and anger flashes through her eyes before she manages to paste her smile back on.

All cameras turn to us, and it takes all of me to paste on a pleasant expression. “Hannah!” the reporter says. “Congratulations on the release of *Cloudy Skies*. I can’t wait to see it. I have no doubt your performance will be phenomenal, as usual.”

She smiles brightly and nods in thanks.

“For years, there were rumors about Ares and you, when in truth, he was dating your sister. Was that hard for you? I know you denied the rumors multiple times, but they never truly went away. Were you ever tempted to spill their secrets and admit they were dating?”

Her smile freezes. “As you know, I rarely discuss my private life. Can I please ask that you keep all questions related to tonight’s premiere?”

The reporter nods and turns to me. “Since it’s rare to see all three of you together, can we have a photo?”

Hannah grins and moves to Ares’s free side, her arm wrapping around his waist as she drops her head to his shoulder. I tense involuntarily even as I smile brightly for the cameras. Much to my relief, Ares doesn’t wrap his arm around her. Instead, he just leans into me further.

I’m not an insecure person, yet somehow Hannah turns me into some kind of jealous monster. I don’t want her near Ares. I don’t want to be reminded of the way we got married, and the history they share. How do I balance wanting to support my sister with the discontentment I feel at the thought of Ares and her?

“Mr. and Mrs. Windsor,” the reporter says, a pleading expression on her face. “Can we please have a kiss?”

Hannah’s expression drops for a moment, but Ares grins as he cups my cheek and leans in, his thumb brushing over my lip for a moment before he lowers his head to mine and kisses me, slowly and deeply. The crowd goes wild around us, but he doesn’t care. He just continues to kiss me as though the entire world isn’t watching — as though Hannah isn’t watching.

By the time he pulls away, I’m panting and desperate for more. “Come on,” he whispers. “Let’s get this movie over with.”

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Chapter Forty-Seven

ARES

Raven has barely spoken a word since we arrived, and I'm worried. She's been smiling for photographs and she's answered every question that's been thrown at her with humor and grace, but she's been acting distant, even though she hasn't taken her hand out of mine unless she had to.

My heart races as we head up to the private balcony that we're watching the screening from. I don't recall ever being so anxious about someone's well-being. I never worried much about Hannah, not even when she acted jealous about any of the actresses under my management, because I always knew she had nothing to worry about, and I had nothing to feel guilty for.

It's different with Raven. I need her to be okay, regardless of whether or not her worries are warranted.

We take our seats, and I lift our joined hands to my lips, kissing the back of her hand tenderly. She looks at me, and that look in her eyes hits me straight in my chest. She looks hurt and so fucking sad, and I have no idea why. All I know is that I must be the reason for it.

I tighten my grip on her hand and lean in to press a kiss to her shoulder, before moving my lips just below her ear. "What's going on, baby? Give me a moment of honesty. Tell me why your beautiful eyes are filled with sorrow."

She turns her face, her nose brushing against mine. I smirk and tilt my head, stealing a kiss. I expected her to kiss me back, but instead, she pulls away.

I frown, and she shakes her head. “Raven,” I murmur, gently grabbing her chin to keep her eyes on me. “What’s going on?”

Her eyes widen as she looks past me, and I have no doubt that Hannah just took her seat right next to me, but I couldn’t care less. All I care about is the pain in my wife’s eyes.

“Ares,” she whispers, her voice breaking. She leans in, her lips brushing against my ear. “I just… I don’t want to hurt her. She’s my sister, Ares, and yeah, she’s not been the best version of herself lately, but I love her. I remember what it felt like to see you with her at these type of events, and I don’t want her to feel that same kind of pain. But simultaneously… I’m jealous of the way she keeps looking at you, the photos the two of you kept taking, the interviews you just did together. I’m… I’m just so *jealous*, and I hate myself for it.”

My eyes widen, and she pulls away, her cheeks flushed. Fucking hell. This woman. I thought she’d want to make it clear to Hannah that I’m hers, that our marriage isn’t the farce Hannah hoped it’d be. I was so certain that she’d want to stake her claim, yet here she is, suffering in silence because she doesn’t want to hurt her sister.

Fuck. I think I’m done for. I think I’m falling in love with my wife. Hell, I think I may have been in love with her for far longer than I’d ever admit to myself.

The movie starts, but all I can focus on is my wife. She stares ahead, her spine straight, and I’m fucking mesmerized. She looks beautiful in this dress and I love every second of seeing her in it, yet I can’t wait to get her home so I can fuck every single insecurity out of her.

Hannah leans into me and smiles. “Do you remember this scene?” she whispers, just loud enough for Raven to hear her too. “You flew out to meet me on set, and you watched me film this. Afterward, we went to that vineyard that gave us the idea to get married in one ourselves.”

Raven tenses, and I tighten my grip on her hand.

“I still remember the way you laid me down in that meadow we found as we toured the surrounding areas.”

Raven bites down on her lip and pulls her hand out of mine, and I grit my teeth as I glance at Hannah. “Enough,” I snap, my voice quiet.

Hannah grins at me provocatively. “Don’t pretend you can’t remember. I still recall how impatient you were. We should visit that vineyard again and reenact some of those memories.”

I stare at her in disbelief. My wife, who has every fucking right to me, is sitting next to me quietly because she doesn’t want to hurt her sister. Meanwhile, Hannah is purposely making stabs at Raven’s heart.

“Have some fucking respect,” I warn her. “Need I remind you that I’m married? To your sister, no less.”

She shrugs. “It’s just a title and a piece of paper. I don’t give a shit, Ares. We both know that the second you and I are alone in a room, you’ll forget all about the fact that you’re married. You always do.”

Raven inhales sharply, and I glance at her to find her blinking back tears. She stares ahead, her expression completely blank, but she can’t hide from me. Fuck.

I rise to my feet and the handful of people on our balcony look up, surprised. “Leave,” I say simply. “My secretary will find you seats to watch the movie from.”

Everyone stands up, questioning looks on their faces, yet they know better than to utter a word of complaint. They leave quietly, led out by Dom, but Hannah remains in her seat.

“Get out,” I tell her.

“Me?”

“Are you going to leave on your own two feet, or will you require the help of my bodyguards?”

She rises to her feet, her eyes wide. “Are you serious? You can’t throw me out.”

“Watch me.”

I nod at one of my bodyguards, and Hannah freezes for a moment. “Are you insane?” she asks. “I’m the lead star of this movie.”

I shrug. “Then I strongly recommend you watch your movie from elsewhere, because you won’t be watching it here, with my wife and me.”

Raven rises to her feet and places her hand on my arm. “Ares,” she says, her voice soft. “Leave it be.”

I glance at her and wrap my arm around her waist. “No,” I tell her simply, before turning back to Hannah. “*Out*.”

Hannah grits her teeth, her eyes flashing with anger. “You’ll regret treating me this way, Ares. We’ve always had our ups and downs, and this is

no different. Don’t go too far, because I promise you, you’ll regret it.”

Then she walks out, my bodyguards on her heels.

“You shouldn’t have done that,” Raven says, her eyes filled with worries. “The last thing we want to do is create a scandal. Next thing we know, all the news outlets are reporting on a family dispute between the three of us. It might not be easy, but we have to take the high road here.”

I turn to my wife and gently cup her cheek, my heart racing. “You’re fucking insane if you think I’m going to sit there and watch you choke back tears. You’re my wife, Raven. She’s nothing but your sister to me. I don’t give a fuck about my past with her, and I don’t want to hear about it either. I certainly won’t fucking sit here and let her hurt you, because we both know that’s exactly what she was doing.”

I pinch her chin and raise her face to mine. “You’re my *wife*. You’re not someone anyone can offend or hurt. Certainly not on my fucking watch.” I bury my hand in her hair and tighten my grip as I roughly pull her closer. “When are you going to realize that you fucking own my heart?”

Her eyes widen as a hint of disbelief flashes through them. Yeah, I suppose I’ve never quite admitted to her that I’m falling hard and fast. I let my fingers trail over her scalp before grabbing a handful of her hair and fisting it in my hand. I bring her face closer to mine before I lean in to kiss her, my touch rough and punishing. Raven moans against my lips and slides her hands up my chest until she’s got her arms wrapped around my neck.

I pull her dress up before lifting her into my arms, her legs wrapping around my waist as I deepen our kiss. “The fact that she managed to hurt you at all makes me feel like I’ve failed you.” I push her against the wall, the sounds of Hannah’s movie playing all around us. All anyone would have to do is look up, and they’d see us, but I don’t give a fuck. “Fuck what she said. Fuck the past. I’m yours, Raven. I will never leave you. No matter what.”

I lower my lips to her neck, my teeth grazing over her skin before I suck down on it, marking her as mine. “I’m fucking obsessed with you,” I admit. “Every little thing you do, every smile, every sigh that leaves your lips. All of it.”

My hand delves underneath her dress, and I smirk when I realize she isn’t wearing underwear. “This,” I groan against her lips. “I love this about you. You always want me just as badly as I want you.”

My fingers trail over her pussy, and my cock twitches when two of my fingers slide into her with ease. “You’re always so fucking wet for me, baby. Tell me, my love, have you always wanted me this way?”

She looks at me, her eyes heavy with desire. “Always.”

Her hands move up my neck until she’s got them buried in my hair. Fucking hell. Just one touch, and she’s got my heart racing. I’m impatient as I unbuckle my belt and free my cock, sliding it against her pussy eagerly.

“I love everything about you,” I whisper as I align my cock, pushing just the tip in. Raven moans, and I wrap my hand over her mouth.

“I love your smile.” I push in halfway, and her eyes fall closed as her legs tighten around me. She pushes against me, trying to get me in all the way, but I hold on to her hip tightly, withholding what she wants.

“I love your moans.” I push in a little further and brush my index finger over her lip. She opens her mouth, and I push two fingers into it. I nearly lose it when she sucks down on them, as though she wishes she had my cock in her mouth, her eyes on mine.

I push into her all the way, already fucking ready to come. “I love your heart,” I whisper as I place both hands on her ass, pulling almost all the way out.

“Fuck, Raven. I think I love *you*.” I thrust into her hard, and she cries out.

“Ares, oh God,” she moans.

I chuckle as I press my lips against hers, kissing her and swallowing down her moans as I fuck her slowly, deeply.

I drop my forehead against hers and inhale shakily. “Yeah, baby. I think I’m fucking in love with you.”

“Ares,” she moans, her eyes finding mine. Her gaze is filled with cautious hope mixed with lust, and she’s never looked more beautiful. “Say that again.”

I pull almost all the way out of her and hold still, my eyes on hers. “I love you, Raven. *I love you.*”

I push into her slowly this time, inch by inch, until I’m deep inside her, my eyes never leaving hers. My right hand moves between us, until I’ve got my fingers drawing circles around her clit. “I love the way your lips part slightly when my thumb brushes over your clit, the way you start to pant for me, your eyes silently begging. Making you come is one of my favorite hobbies, baby.”

She bites down on her lip as my touch becomes rougher, more impatient. All the while, I continue to fuck her slowly, the whole world fading away. I don't give a fuck that there are hundreds of people watching a movie just below this balcony. All I can see is my wife.

"I think I'm addicted to your pussy."

"I think I'm addicted to *you*," she whispers.

I flick her clit roughly, pushing her right to the edge. "I'll keep you hooked, baby. I'll keep feeding your addiction, so you'll never leave me."

I watch as her breathing comes quicker and increase the pace, fucking her hander, moving my fingers faster, until she unravels for me.

"Ares," she moans. I wrap my hand over her mouth as she comes, my name on her lips. Yeah, I'm fucking done for. I'm in love with her. I push her against the wall harder, fucking her with quick, rough thrusts. She takes all of me, and I come seconds after she does, my forehead dropping to hers.

"Ares," she whispers, her voice husky. "I love you, too."

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Chapter Forty-Eight

RAVEN

I bite down on my lip as I stare at the text messages Ares has been sending me all morning. I should be finalizing the model lineup for my upcoming show, but I keep daydreaming about my husband. Being with him has been better than I ever could've dreamed of. Everything I thought I'd never have is within reach now.

It makes me wonder if my suspicions about Hannah and Ares were true. He never seemed happy around her — not the way he is with his family. I thought it'd just been my own wishful thinking, but maybe it wasn't.

When he rejected me, I thought that was it for us. I was certain I'd never have another chance, and I'd have to watch him have his happily ever after with my sister. I never thought that'd only be the start of our story.

Ares: *do you know what the best thing is about your wife being a supermodel?*

Raven: *…working out together?*

Ares: *Last night's workout definitely was intense…*

Ares: *But no, that's not the best part. It's all the pictures of you in lingerie that I don't even have to sneakily take.*

Raven: *you do realize everyone can see those photos, right?*

Ares: *damn it, Rave. Don't remind me of those creepy pervs that are always perving on you. The fact that you're even thinking of them pisses me*

off. Seems like I didn't fuck you hard enough last night, huh? I'll make sure you won't be able to think of anyone but me by the time the sun rises tomorrow.

I chuckle. I can't help it. Ares has always seemed so levelheaded, so watching him lose his mind over me is just… it's oddly heartwarming. I love how he keeps posting photos of us together every time he gets pissed off about me appearing at an event with another man. He's giving me the freedom to have my career without making me feel guilty about it, yet he's reminding the world that I'm his in the cutest way possible.

Raven: *Pervs be perving, my love. I'm not convinced that half those accounts aren't actually just secret fan accounts you've created to stalk me with, though.*

Ares: *to be fair, that's a pretty good idea. I should make a few more and drown them all out. Brb, I have something really important to do.*

A soft giggle escapes my lips, and I press my lips together. He's crazy, and he's the exact same guy I once fell in love with. The one I thought I'd lost over the years.

"Raven?"

I sit up at the sound of Hannah's voice, my smile melting away. She walks into my office, her expression unreadable. She hasn't sought me out since she asked me to speak to Ares on her behalf, but I should've known the premiere would force her to come to me. I didn't intend for it to be, but she would've seen it as a declaration of war. Everything is always a battle for Hannah.

"What can I do for you, Han? Do you need a dress for an event?"

She stares at me as she sits down opposite me, her expression chilling. "Why are you acting like I only ever come to you when I need something? There's no one here, Raven. You don't need to pretend to be the good girl, the aggrieved sibling."

I tense as I suppress the hurt I feel at her words. "I'm sorry, what?"

She crosses her arms. "Is that why you fucked my fiancee? Because you wanted revenge for the way I've treated you over the years?"

"I… I…" I clear my throat and wrap my arms around myself, my heart racing.

"Why did you show up at all, Raven? Why did you show up on my wedding day? You know as well as I do that Grandma Anne never would've let your company fail, not even if Mom and Dad took away your funding.

You never had anything to lose. If you'd just stayed away, they'd have had no choice but to reschedule the wedding. Why did you do this to me?"

I look away, unsure of what to say. I knew we'd have to have this conversation eventually, and I've gone over it in my head so many times… but now that I need them the most, I can't find the words I need.

"You know as well as I do that Ares values duty and loyalty above everything else. Do you think he's suddenly in love with you? So quickly? After the years he spent with me? Or do you think he's making the best of a tough situation and getting laid while he's at it? You're his wife now, so he feels he needs to make you happy, no matter what that means for his own happiness. He'll pretend till the very bitter end if it makes his family happy — which, in his mind, now includes you."

She chuckles. "Do you know why we grew apart, Raven? It's because I've always seen the way you looked at Ares. What kind of woman would lust after her sister's fiance the way you did? It always disgusted me. Did you know Ares and I used to joke about your little crush on him? He used to think it was childish, but cute. He never once even saw you as a woman. But let me guess… you wore him down by seducing him?"

My thoughts turn to the various outfits I wore around the house in an attempt to make him notice me, the things I said and did.

"Hannah," I murmur, my voice soft. "What do you want? What does it all matter? I'm married to Ares now."

She smiles at me and lifts her hand to her chest, twirling around the ring on her ring finger. My blood runs cold when I recognize the ring she's wearing. It's her original wedding ring. The one Ares put on my finger the day we got married.

"Not for long," she tells me. "You might be the one he's married to now, but once his duty to you is over, he'll come straight back to me. I will always be the one he truly wants, the one he wishes walked down that aisle. And you, my darling sister? You'll always be my replacement, the one he was forced to settle for. You chased after him knowing exactly what kind of damage you'd cause, but you failed to account for the damage it'll cause *you* in the end. No matter what you do, you will never be me, Raven. Not only will you eventually lose Ares… you lost me, too. I hope your marriage to him is worth it, because it'll cost you everything."

I bite down on my lip in an effort to control my emotions. "Where did you get that ring?"

She grins. “Like I said… I will always be the one he wants. He’ll never let you have anything that’s *mine*. Not for long, anyway.”

“Ares gave it to you?”

She nods. “He did. I told him I wanted my ring back, so he said he’d get you a new one. We spent so much time picking our rings out together… I can’t imagine how hard it must’ve been for him to see it on your finger. I didn’t think he’d give it to me so easily, you know? I thought he’d be angry and spiteful, but he’s just the same Ares I’ve always known and loved. He’d never deny me anything, even if he has to take it away from his supposed *wife*. But then again… you already know that, don’t you? You know better than anyone else that he loves me with all he’s got. After a love like that, how much could possibly be left? How could anyone else ever measure up?”

She rises to her feet and throws me a hard look. “I will never forgive you for what you did, Raven. You might think things are going well with Ares, and that you made the right choice in doing what you did… but mark my words. You’ll regret marrying him one day, and he will come back to me. He always does.”

I bite down on my lip harshly as she walks out of my office, leaving her venom sinking deep into my soul, poisoning every shred of hope I’ve held onto.

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Chapter Forty-Nine

RAVEN

I stare up at the house as I try to gather the courage to go in. I shouldn't have let Hannah's words rattle me, but I did. She got to me, because she's right.

I knew exactly what I was doing when I chose to take her place. Had I stayed away, Grandma Anne would no doubt have given Hannah yet another chance. I was selfish and took a risk. Did I make the wrong choice?

I inhale deeply and steel myself as I walk into the house. I'm scared to face Ares, knowing there's a chance I'll find some truth in her words if I confront him. I feel like I've built a house of cards, and at any moment, everything will come crashing down on me.

"Raven?" Ares looks at me with clear concern in his eyes.

"You're home late today. I've been calling you. Where have you been?"

I force a smile and shake my head. "I've just been working late, that's all." I hesitate. "I've got a headache, Ares. I'm heading to bed."

He walks up to me and grabs my shoulders, holding me in place as his gaze roams over my face. My heart starts to ache when he gently brushes my hair out of my face. Is any of this real? Is he pretending because he thinks it's the right thing to do? Am I just an obligation to him?

I bite down on my lip harshly, but I can't hold back my tears. I look away as a tear drops down my cheek. I expected Ares to panic, or to

demand an explanation for my agony, but he just takes me into his arms and threads his hand into my hair. I burst into tears in earnest and bury my face against his neck.

Sobs tear through my throat, and he tightens his grip on me, as though he's trying to hold me together when I fail to do so myself.

"You're breaking my heart, Cupcake. I'm immune to everyone's tears but yours. You've got me ready to fall to my knees and beg you to tell me what I can do to make it all better."

I shake my head, unsure of what to say. Even if I tried, I doubt the words would come out. How do I explain that a thousand fears have consumed me? How do I explain that guilt unlike anything I've ever felt before is nipping at my soul, and despite that, I'd do it all over again if it means having this with him?

Ares leans down and lifts me into his arms, his steps resounding through the hallway as he carries me to our bedroom. He sits down at the edge of the bed and keeps me in his lap as he moves his hand over my back soothingly. It all just makes my heart break even further.

"Raven," he whispers, sounding pained.

I sit up in his lap and wipe away my tears as best as I can. I can't keep hiding. I can't keep drowning in my pain — not if it's of Hannah's making.

"Hannah came to my office today."

He tenses and locks his jaw, his expression unreadable.

"Ares… did you… d-did you give her my wedding ring?"

His eyes widen, and he cups my cheeks tenderly. "Baby," he whispers. "I swear to you that it's nothing like what you might be thinking. She asked for it, and I gave it to her because I didn't want it to continuously remind you of her. And to be honest, Rave, I didn't want to hang onto something like that. I sent her mine too. I have no need for either of them."

He strokes my cheek with the back of his fingers, his gaze pleading, as though he needs me to believe him.

"It kills me," I whisper. I reach for him and trail a finger over his temple, too scared to ask the questions I need answers to. "The guilt, the pain. It's all too much, Ares. Did I make the wrong decision? Does a small part of you despise me for walking down that aisle instead of staying away? Do you resent me for standing between Hannah and you?"

He opens his mouth to answer, but I place my index finger against his lips, silencing him. "Don't," I whisper. "I don't have the courage to listen to

your answers, Ares. I'd rather let my fears eat me alive than hear you confirm Hannah's insinuations. I don't think I can survive hearing you say that a small part of you still loves her. I'm scared that you'll pity me and you'll tell me everything I want to hear without meaning a single word. I'm scared that everything between us truly is just a duty for you. I won't survive you discarding me for her."

I let my finger fall away, fresh tears rolling down my cheeks as I do so. Ares sighs and grabs my wrists, his grip tight as he pushes them behind my back. "Are you done speaking, my love? I fucking hope so, because it's my turn."

My eyes widen, and he smiles despite the traces of heartache in his eyes.

"You, Raven Windsor, are the single most unexpected yet best thing that has ever happened to me. I wasn't truly living before you. You drive me fucking insane in the very best way. You make me laugh every single day, and you, my beautiful wife, make me feel things I've *never* felt before. I thought I knew what love was, you know? I thought it meant compromise, selflessness and patience. Now I know better. True love is maddening, all-consuming, and it's fucking selfish, Rave. It's impatience and counting down the minutes until you get home. It's being petty about all the men sliding into your DMs and it's fucking you raw on our brand-new sofa because I need you with an intensity that extends beyond the physical. It's decorating our home together and actually caring about the details, because I want our home to be *ours*. It's arguing with you when I normally would've let things go, simply because when it's you, I actually care about every single little fucking thing. That, Mrs. Windsor, is love. Or at least, I think it is, because how else would you define the way I feel? You're everything I didn't realize I needed, and now that I've had you, I can't go back to a life before you. Not ever. No matter what."

I stare at him speechlessly, and he smirks. "Yeah," he whispers. "I didn't see it coming either, but here we are, baby. You and me. It's just you and me in this marriage, Raven. There's no space for anyone else, so stop letting her in. I know it hurts, and I know you love her. It isn't easy to figure out how to keep her in our lives when each time we see her, we're confronted with a past we both wish didn't exist. I feel the same guilt you're feeling, but it isn't ours to carry. You and I have done nothing wrong, you hear me?"

I nod and wrap my arms around his neck, my words caught in my throat. He has no idea how long I've been wanting to hear these words, or how much they mean to me.

Another tear runs down my cheek, and Ares catches it with his thumb. He cups my face and leans in, his lips brushing over mine gently, softly, his kiss conveying every single word he just spoke.

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Chapter Fifty

ARES

I smile to myself as I stare at The Herald's headline. Normally, the mere name of this damn gossip paper pisses me off. Their headlines are always overly sensational and irritating, but today they've done a great job.

Raven and Ares Windsor's wedding rings reportedly cost MILLIONS

Looks like nothing is impossible for the top 1%. Ares and Raven's rings were reportedly handcrafted by elusive master goldsmith Richard Laurier. Our sources tell us that the couple's rings were inspired by the famous model's drawings. Laurier's designs are highly coveted and rare, reserved mostly for royalty. We have it on good authority that many celebrities have been shunned by the goldsmith, but it appears an exception was made for the Windsors.

Recent photos of Raven's ring reveal that it's at least fifteen carats. Based on our estimates, her ring is worth a cool 25 million. Meanwhile, her

media mogul husband appears to be wearing a ring with a feather pattern on it — no doubt a tribute to his wife's name. A bold move for a couple that is so secretive about their relationship, yet it's perfectly in line with what we'd expect of the Windsors.

In the coming days, we hope to give you more news about the couple that continues to evade our cameras with surprising ease. Stay tuned, and remember, you read it here first!

I smirk at the cute photo of Raven and me, my arm around her shoulder as we walk out of her office building. Hannah is crazy if she thinks she can get away with hurting Raven the way she did. I've been patient and quiet, in part out of respect for our past and her relationship to Raven, and in part because of the guilt I feel every time Raven makes my heart race. But it ends here. There's a lot I'm willing to overlook, but tears in my wife's eyes aren't one of those things.

Hannah always desperately wanted her rings to be designed by Laurier, but I've always steadfastly refused. I'm not even sure why. Perhaps it's because my grandmother always insisted that he was only to be contacted for intricate heirloom pieces. I have no idea, yet I didn't even think twice when Raven so much as insinuated that she didn't like her ring. I know this'll hurt Hannah, but I'm done catering to her. I'm done keeping the peace.

Raven doesn't know it, but I've tightly controlled the press surrounding us. Every hint of a rumor about Hannah and me has been suppressed before it ever saw the light, but I'll need to be more careful. It's harder to control information on the internet. I can do it just fine in newspapers and magazines, but the internet moves too fast to completely bury stories.

Hannah isn't used to not getting her way, and I think she's finally starting to realize that she and I are truly over. She won't take well to Raven and I being happy together. That wasn't part of her plans, after all. It'd be so easy to destroy her career and remove her from our lives, but I know Raven would never let that happen. She's always loved Hannah in a way Hannah never deserved. I can't risk fueling Raven's guilt.

Thankfully, my words gave Raven the reassurance she needed in our relationship, but I suspect her sadness stems from the knowledge that things will never be the same again between Hannah and her. For as long as I've known her, Raven has made excuses for her sister. I think she's finally starting to see that this time, the only way to make her sister happy is by sacrificing her own happiness.

I paste on my best innocent smile as I walk into the house, welcomed by the sound of Raven's sweet voice singing a rendition of some pop song I don't know. She hasn't been herself since her argument with Hannah, but she seems better today. I have no doubt she's seen The Herald's article, since I made sure that it's trending everywhere.

I pause in the doorway to the kitchen and take her in. She's wearing a long cream-colored nightgown today, and fuck, she looks far too enticing in it.

It's odd, because I've seen her walk down the catwalk in nothing but underwear, yet this is so much sexier. Outside of work, she's always been dressed so professionally that it feels strangely enticing to see this side of her… this part that only belongs to *me*. No one but me gets to see my wife like this, her hair in a bun, no makeup on her beautiful face, and her body on display for me.

"Hey baby," I murmur as I walk up to her. She smiles at me and lifts her face for a quick kiss. "What are you making?" I ask, looking over her shoulder.

She turns, and her body brushes against mine. I should take a step back, but I love having her so near me. I love seeing the way her eyes widen ever so slightly, the way her gaze drops to my lips for a second before she looks away.

"I'm baking some bread. I'm making enough for both of us."

I smirk at her and wrap my hand around her waist, startling her. "Are you putting me on a diet, wife? Aren't you satisfied with my abs?"

She smiles at me, her eyes roaming over my body for a moment. "I'm not sure. How about you take off that shirt and show me?"

I smile as my hands move to my shirt. "You don't think I will?"

"Do you dare to? I'm constantly surrounded by sexy male models. Can you compete with them?"

My lips fall open and I narrow my eyes at my wife as I unbutton my shirt. "You tell me, Rave." My shirt falls open, and the way her eyes are

glued to my chest brings me a strange sense of satisfaction. “Can I compete?”

She lifts a hand to my chest and lets her fingers trail down my body, taking in every curve of my abs. A sharp burst of desire rushes straight to my cock at her touch, and I inhale deeply in an effort to calm myself. The way she looks in that nightgown… fucking incredible.

“Yeah,” she says, her voice breathy. “You’ll do.”

I grin as I lift her on top of the kitchen counter and spread her legs so I can stand between them. “I’ll do, huh? That doesn’t sound so convincing. How about I show you the rest of my body, too?”

“I think that sounds like a great idea. It’ll allow me to truly assess your body and all, you know?”

A soft chuckle escapes my lips as she wraps her fingers around the lapels of my suit jacket. She looks into my eyes as she pushes it off my shoulder.

“Ares,” she whispers. “Did you mean it? When you told me you loved me… did you mean it?”

I smile at her despite the aching of my heart. I wish I could reach inside my heart and show her that it’s filled with nothing but her. “Every single word, Raven. Maybe it’s too soon, too quick. Or maybe… maybe we’ve been in the making for years, but neither of us had the courage to admit it to ourselves. I barely dare say the words, but it’s true. I’m in love with you, Raven Windsor. Hell, if I’m truly honest with myself, I fell for you long before you said *I do*.”

She looks at me with wide eyes, a sweet blush slowly coloring her cheeks pink. “Ares,” she murmurs. “I love you.”

Fuck. A rush of emotions I’ve never felt before nearly brings me to my knees. I’ll never get enough of hearing her say that. I roughly thread my hand through her hair and pull her closer, my lips finding hers with a new type of urgency. I’ve never so badly wanted to own someone, mark her as mine. “I’m fucking obsessed with you,” I murmur against her lips. “Every fucking piece of you.” She groans and wraps her legs around my hips, her body flush against mine. “And I, baby, love everything you are, right down to your beautiful soul. I love you, Raven.”

She pulls away to look at me. The look in her eyes tells me she doesn’t believe me, but that’s okay. I’ll spend the rest of our lives proving it to her.

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Chapter Fifty-One

RAVEN

"It's been a while since Grandma called us all together like that so urgently," Sierra says as we walk toward the main house together. "The last time she did that it was to announce your upcoming wedding."

"Do you have any idea what it might be about?"

Sierra shakes her head. "No clue. I asked my brothers as well, and they have no idea."

My phone starts to ring and groan as I stare at my caller ID. I have no doubt my mother is calling about something related to Hannah, and I don't want to hear it.

"Who is that?" Sierra asks, glancing at my phone. She rolls her eyes when she sees my mother's name and declines the call for me, but my mother calls me straight back. She's so relentless. If I don't pick up, she'll just keep calling, until she wears me down.

"Mom?"

"Raven, sweetheart. I've been trying to reach you for hours."

Normally I'd have made excuses, but I don't have it in me today. "What is it, Mom?" It doesn't sit well with me that she's calling me sweetheart when every conversation we've had since I got married was hostile.

She hesitates for a moment. "I heard Hannah and you had an argument? She's been incredibly upset and told me that you and Ares… that you're

together?”

I grit my teeth for a moment and take a calming breath. “Is that so? I assume you told her to accept the fact that she chose to walk away from him? Did you remind her that I’m *married* to Ares? What exactly is so surprising about be being with my own husband? Surely she isn’t thinking anything immoral. You raised her better than that, didn’t you?”

Sierra’s lips fall open, and then she grins wickedly, nodding to herself. I roll my eyes at her and continue to walk.

Mom falls silent for a moment before clearing her throat. “Ares and you are coming home for your father’s 60th birthday, aren’t you? Will you be spending the weekend with us?”

I hesitate. When Ares and I agreed to go to my father’s birthday together, we’d only just gotten married. Things weren’t so complicated yet, so messy. I’m not sure either of us should be around Hannah for an entire weekend. I don’t want to put a downer on Dad’s birthday, and we’re bound to get into an argument. “Yes,” I tell her, resigned. I can’t keep running away from my family. At some point, we’ll have to learn to co-exist.

“Please be on your best behavior. Try not to aggravate your sister, okay? She’s been having a hard time lately, and it’s taken a toll on her health. I’m worried.”

Anger takes root deep within me, and I tighten my grip on my phone. “Sure,” I promise. “I hope you told her the same thing, Mom. I won’t provoke her, but don’t expect me to tolerate her toxic behavior for even a single second, because I won’t.”

“*Toxic*?” Mom repeats, outraged.

“Don’t even bother denying it,” I warn her. “I neither have the time nor the patience to deal with any of the excuses you’ll make for her. I’ll be there this weekend, and I’ll bring my husband.”

“Raven!”

“I need to go, Mom. I’ll speak to you later.”

I end the call and put my phone away, ignoring Sierra’s gleeful stares. “Damn, girl,” she says, grinning. “It’s about damn time.”

I shrug. “I’ve tried being sweet, Sierra. I’ve been kind and patient, taking into account everyone’s feelings but my own. Enough is enough.”

She grabs my hand and entwines our fingers, a proud smile on her face. “You’re made of steel, yet you were always so malleable around your family. They got too used to you bending backwards to keep the peace, but

it’s time you put yourself first. You’re not alone anymore, Rave. You never were, but you’re officially a Windsor now. We’re your family now.”

I smile at her. “I hear you, babe.”

She grins. “I know you do, but I’ll repeat myself until you take it to heart.”

I squeeze her hand in thanks as we round the corner and walk into Grandma’s living room, where the rest is already waiting for us.

Ares’s gaze drops to our joined hands, and he narrows his eyes. “Let go of my wife,” he warns, his tone unyielding.

Sierra stares him down. “She was mine before she was ever yours. You wanna fight me, bro? Who do you think she’ll back?”

I pull my hand out of hers and shake my head as I walk over to Ares, who instantly grabs both of my hands, holding them in his as he smirks at his sister.

“You’re both so childish,” I mutter as I glance around the room. We’re still missing Luca, and, of course, Dion, who’s in London.

Ares wraps his hand around my waist and leans in. “You know it’s your fault, right? You turn me into a childish, petty fool.”

I look up into his eyes and grin. “And it’s my greatest accomplishment.”

“Ugh, you two are so disgustingly cute together,” Lex says, groaning.

Zane grins when Luca walks in with Valentina, his secretary, and waves them over as we head into the dining room. Val smiles at me and rushes toward me. “Rave!”

I hug her tightly and then step back to assess her outfit. “I love this dress on you.”

She smirks at me. “I only wear the best of the best, and this designer? She tops them all.”

I chuckle as she twirls around in the dress I designed for her, a deep sense of pride settling in my chest.

“Kids,” Grandma calls, her eyes moving over all of us. “As you may have guessed, I have an announcement to make.”

We all tense, knowing that whatever it is, it’ll affect all of us. Grandma smiles, her gaze pausing on Valentina and Luca for a moment.

“Luca,” she says. His spine straightens, and he nods. “Your engagement has been decided.”

Both Valentina and Luca tense, and I watch them curiously. Their relationship has always intrigued me. She was assigned to him by Grandma,

and he’s always hated her for it, yet she’s the only one he relies on. For years, I was certain love would bloom between them, but it never did.

“Who is it?” he asks, resigned.

“Natalia Ivanov, daughter of Nikolai Ivanov and heiress to an oil empire. Oil is an industry we have yet to enter, and this will be our in.”

“Natalia Ivanov?” he repeats. “The socialite? She’s a spoiled materialistic airhead.”

Grandma narrows her eyes at him. “She’s your soon-to-be fiancee. She’s a sweet girl, Luca. You’ll see.”

He grits his teeth and turns around without another word, his steps loud on the marble floor as he walks away, slamming the door behind him. Valentina stares at his retreating back, hesitating for a single moment before she goes after him. Grandma watches them and smiles to herself. Something about that smile doesn’t sit well with me. Is she… is she playing some kind of game? Surely not?

“Well,” she says, sighing. “That went about as well as I could’ve hoped for.”

“Ivanov?” Zane asks. “Really, Grandma? He’s right, you know. That girl is always throwing a tantrum in public, causing unnecessary drama. She’s in no way fit to become a Windsor.”

Lexington nods. “She’s a terrible fit for Luca,” he agrees. “He doesn’t have the patience for her kind of behavior.”

“Yeah, Grandma,” Sierra says. “This is… this is not a good idea.”

Grandma merely smiles and holds her hand up. “I took the liberty of having dinner served,” she tells us. “Let’s speak of this no more. Let’s eat, instead.”

We all exchange looks, none of sure what to do or say. “Aren’t you worried?” I ask Ares. He smiles at me and shakes his head. “No,” he murmurs. “Grandma truly does know best.”

The way he looks at me makes the butterflies in my stomach go wild, and I can’t help but blush as I smile back at him.

Yeah, she certainly was right about the two of us. Let’s hope Luca is just as lucky.

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Chapter Fifty-Two

RAVEN

"You seem nervous," Ares says as we pull up in front of my parents' house. I nod and turn toward him. "Moment of honesty," I whisper. "I'm scared to face Hannah, and the thought of being surrounded by my family for an entire weekend fills me with anxiety. Every time I'm here, I feel like I'm lacking. Besides… this house… it's filled with memories of you and her."

Ares leans in and cups my cheek, his thumb brushing over my lips tenderly. "I'll overwrite them," he promises. "However, Cupcake, if you don't want to go, we don't have to, you know?"

I frown at him in surprise. "Family means everything to you."

He looks into my eyes, his expression carrying a hint of sorrow that he tries to bury behind a smile. "That's because I mean everything to my family."

Hurt renders me speechless for a moment, and he looks away. "I love you," he whispers. "I love you with all my heart, Raven, and I can't stand watching them take you for granted. They're your family, and I'll always respect and honor your wishes when it comes to them, but know that I don't agree with the way you let them treat you."

I place my index finger on his chin and lean in for a kiss, loaning some of his strength. "I'll be okay," I whisper against his lips. "Because you'll be there with me."

I nod. “Always.”

“Ares?”

He tilts his head in question.

“Can I ask you to promise me something? This weekend… can you please put my father first? I want to keep the peace as best as I can. He should be able to enjoy his birthday, you know?”

He hesitates for a moment, but in the end, he nods. “I promise,” he says, his tone revealing his reluctance. “I’ll follow your lead, Rave. It’s your family. Your choice.”

I nod and lean in, pressing a soft kiss to his cheek. “Thank you,” I whisper.

He smiles at me, but I see the worry he tries to hide. “Ready?” he asks, his tone soft and patient, as though he’ll sit here all night with me if I want him to.

“Ready,” I nod.

Ares gets out of the car and walks around it, offering me his hand as we walk to the front door. Nerves truly set in, and I bite down on my lip. Going home to see my parents should be something I look forward to, yet I always dread walking through this door.

“Ares!” Dad says, a smile on his face. His gaze drops to our joined hands, and he looks away awkwardly as he pats Ares on the shoulder. “Got a great bottle of scotch for the two of us, my boy.”

Dad leans in and presses a kiss to my forehead before leaning in to whisper in my ear. “And I hid some of those cupcakes you like in your room, sweetheart.”

I giggle, my heart warming. This is why I keep coming home, because the good still outweighs the bad. “Thank you, Dad.”

“Ares, Hannah.” I look up at Mom, who freezes for a moment before raising her hand to her lips. “Sorry, Raven. I’m so used to saying their names together.” She shakes her head and walks toward us. “I’m glad you’re here,” she says, but she doesn’t sound it. Her smile is far more genuine when she turns toward Ares. “I prepared the guest room for you, Ares.”

He wraps his hand around my waist and pulls me into him. “I won’t need it,” he assures her. “I’ll share a room with my wife.”

Mom’s eyes drop down to his hand, and then she looks away, visibly uncomfortable. “Don’t you think that’s somewhat… insensitive?”

Ares stares her down. “Insensitive? What is? To be spending a weekend in the same home as the woman who left me at the altar? No, not at all.” He turns to me then. “You don’t mind that, do you? Or we wouldn’t be here.”

I bite back a smile at the way he’s purposely misunderstanding her and subtly shake my head. I love him for it, but I don’t need him to fight my battles, nor do I need to be reminded of their history even more than I already will be.

“Come on,” I tell him. “Let’s go put our stuff upstairs.”

Mom watches us as we disappear up the stairs, and I can’t help but feel uneasy. It’s been years since I last felt at home here, but I’ve never felt quite this out of place.

Ares pauses in the doorway to my room and smiles. “Hey, I bought you that little cupcake shaped pillow.” He walks in and looks around in wonder as I sit down on my bed, seeing my room through fresh eyes.

“I forget that you haven’t been in my room in years, if ever.”

Ares pauses, a hint of remorse flashing through his eyes. He walks up to me and kneels down in front of me, his eyes on mine. “Tell me, Cupcake. Is there anything I can do to make this weekend more bearable for you?”

I look into his eyes and sigh. “Shouldn’t I be the one to ask that question? Being here, around Hannah. Isn’t it hard for you, too?”

“It should be, shouldn’t it?” he asks. “But it isn’t. It doesn’t affect me at all.” He reaches for me and buries a hand in my hair before pulling me closer, his lips hovering over mine. “How could it, when I’ve got you?” He kisses me then, his touch rough and demanding. Just like that, he melts away my worries.

“Raven!” Mom shouts from downstairs.

I groan when Ares pulls away and drops his forehead to mine. “Come on,” I tell him. “We’d better head downstairs.”

He presses another quick kiss to my lips before he rises to his feet and pulls me up with him. Perhaps this weekend will be manageable after all.

Ares follows me down, and the front door opens just as we reach the bottom of the stairs. Hannah walks in, pausing when she sees Ares. Her eyes flash with agony for a moment, and it hits me right in the chest. This is exactly what it used to be like for me. I used to hate coming home, because I couldn’t bear seeing her with him. The last thing I want to do to her is make her feel my pain. No one should have to go through that.

“Raven!” Mom calls again.

I inhale deeply as I make my way to the kitchen, my mind on Hannah and Ares. I have no doubt she'll try to get his attention, and it makes me feel uncomfortable. Is this what the rest of our lives will be like? Will I be at odds with my sister forever? Ares and I might be okay right now, but this entire situation is taxing for all of us.

Mom smiles at me and points to the sink. "Do you think you could quickly help me load the dishwasher?"

I nod and get to work quietly. I wait patiently, knowing she wouldn't have called me in here if she didn't have anything to say to me.

"Rave," she says eventually. "Don't you think it'd be good for Ares and Hannah to talk through their issues? Their breakup was messy, and it affected us all. I'd really like to go back to a time when there was harmony in our home."

Harmony. I suppose that's what everyone but me experienced here. For me, this home has always been filled with longing. I wanted to belong, to be loved. First by my parents, then by Ares. This is the home that has always left me feeling inadequate, the home that took until I lost myself.

I remain silent as Mom stares at me. The truth is that I don't have an answer for her. Yes, it would be nice to have harmony, but for who? In the scenario we've found ourselves in, someone is bound to get hurt, and for once, I won't let it be me.

"Oh," Mom says. "Good. They're talking."

I tense and follow her gaze. The kitchen window looks out to the veranda, where Hannah and Ares are standing, lost in conversation. The way he's looking at her makes me feel sick. I know that half smile. It's how he's always looked at her, as though he finds everything she does endearing.

I try so hard to be strong, but watching the two of them from here, where they think we can't see us, fills me with insecurity. He was so assertive and drew a clear boundary between them that day in the theater, but was that just because I was there? Was he just doing what he considered the right thing to do?

I bite down on my lip harshly, annoyed with myself for doubting him. This is what this home does to me. It fills me with insecurity and heartache. It doesn't matter how much I grow as a person. Every single time I go home, it feels like I've taken ten steps back.

I grit my teeth and wash my hands, leaving half the dishes in the sink as I walk out of the kitchen.

“Raven!” Mom shouts, her tone angry. I ignore her and walk onto the veranda, finding Ares and Hannah by the swing in the corner.

They both look up at me, and Hannah tenses. “Raven,” she says, forcing a smile. It hurts that this is what our relationship has become. When I look at her, it isn’t my sister I see anymore.

I let my eyes roam over her leisurely, pausing on her hand for a moment. “You’re not wearing your wedding ring,” I say, my tone nonchalant. “You know, the one you told me Ares gave you?”

Her eyes widen, and she shoots him a furtive look before looking back at me. “No, I stored it away safely. I didn’t want to risk anyone asking questions about it.”

Ares grabs my hand and lifts it to his lips, kissing the back of my hand and positioning it so my wedding ring sparkles in the light just right. “Just wear it if you want,” he tells her. “It’s a relatively simple piece of jewelry. It’s nothing but a relic from the past.”

Hannah clears her throat and stares at my ring for a moment, before looking down at the floor, leaving me feeling torn. I don’t want to knowingly hurt her, but I want the reassurance that Ares’s touch gives me.

“You know,” she says. “Tonight is the first night in years that the three of us will all be spending the night here. We should play some board games or something.”

Ares wraps his arm around me and shakes his head. “Perhaps some other night,” he tells her, before turning to me. “I’m pretty tired.” The way he smirks at me tells me he’s not tired at all, and I suspect Hannah knows it. “How about we head to bed?”

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Chapter Fifty-Three

ARES

"You've been quiet all evening," I murmur as I walk out of Raven's bathroom. I lean back against the wall and watch my wife. She's in nothing but a towel, seated in front of her vanity with a blank expression. She's been combing her hair for several minutes now when it rarely takes her more than a few moments. I can pretty much guess what's going through her mind.

She looks up at me through the mirror and forces a smile as she puts her hairbrush down, but she makes no move to come near me. Instead, her gaze travels back to her face, and the way she stares at her reflection breaks my heart.

She and I have been existing in an environment that has been wholly supportive of our marriage. Everyone around us has acted like my past with Hannah is non-existent, and the fact that very few people ever even knew about Hannah and me made it much easier to live in our facade.

I expected this trip to be hard, but this has exceeded my expectations in the worst way. I should have done more to make her feel better, but there's nothing I could have done without breaking my promise to her. She asked me to keep the peace and put her father first, and I've tried my best to do so… but I shouldn't have.

"Raven."

I walk up to her and grab her hand, pulling her to her feet in one swift motion. She's gasps as she crashes into me, and I wrap my arms around her with a smile on my face.

"Ares," she says, her voice soft and filled with anguish. She's stiff in my embrace, and it pains me. She isn't herself here, and I wish I could just take her home.

"Cupcake," I whisper as I lean in, my lips brushing over hers. She tenses, and a sense of loss washes over me. Normally she'd have smiled as she rises to her tiptoes, kissing me in that way she knows drives me insane. But here, now, she avoids my touch.

I let my fingers trails up her spine, until I've got them buried in her hair, my grip tight. I force my wife to face me, yet she still defies me, averting her gaze. "Baby, look at me."

She inhales shakily as her long lashes flutter for a moment before she looks up at me, her eyes filled with tears. Fuck.

"Ares," she whispers, my name a plea on her lips. "Please don't. I can't do this tonight. I can't keep up the pretence tonight."

"We stopped pretending long ago, Raven, and you know it."

She looks into my eyes, and my beautiful, strong wife… looks broken. "Did we?" she asks. "Or are we just fooling ourselves? Even my mother is trying to push you two back together, and it's exhausting, Ares."

She tears her gaze away and pushes against my chest, but there's no way I'm letting her go. Not now. Not like this.

"Just now, Hannah mentioned this would be the first time in years that the three of us would be spending the night in the same house, didn't she? Do you know why that is, Ares?"

I shake my head, unable to tear my eyes off her. My heart is racing, and a deep sense of dread fills me. Even though I've got her in my arms, it feels like I'm losing her.

She looks into my eyes as a tear runs down her cheek, and I catch it with my thumb. "It's because I could hear you two," she whispers. "That wall my bed is pushed up against? Hannah's bed is on the other side of that wall. Every single time you stayed over, I could hear you two. I could hear her moaning your name. I could hear how badly you wanted her, how loving you were with her."

Fuck. *Fuck*.

“I thought I was over it, you know? But the memories still plague me. It still hurts, Ares. I thought I’d be able to deal with the pain, but seeing you with her today? I…”

She pushes against my chest again, and I tighten my grip on her hair, tilting her face toward mine as I lower my lips to hers. Raven inhales shakily as my lips brush against hers, and I kiss her tenderly, slowly, taking my time with her, reassuring her in the only way I know how to.

Her arms wrap around my neck, and I pull her flush against me as I deepen our kiss, my tongue brushing over her lips in a demand for more. She opens up for me, and I take my time teasing my wife, proving to her she’s the only one I want.

The distant sound of a door closing makes her pull away, the passion I’d lit in her dousing as she takes a step away from me, her gaze wandering to the wall by her bed. I suppose Hannah just walked into her bedroom, but I won’t let that deter me. The ferocity with which I want to reassure my wife startles even me. I’m not even remotely concerned about Hannah — Raven is all I can think about.

“No,” I tell her as I pull her back to me, my forehead dropping to hers. “I’m not letting you go. I’m sorry, baby. I’m so fucking sorry. I can’t erase those memories, but I swear to you that they don’t matter as much as the present, and if you let me, I’ll try to overwrite them, okay? Isn’t that what I promised you in the car? Fuck the past, Cupcake. All I care about is you and me, here and now.”

She pulls away a little to look into my eyes, her gaze searching. She’s looks at me with such strong doubts, and all I want to do is take them away.

I smile at her as I pull on her towel, letting it fall to the floor before I take a step closer to her. Raven watches me with wide eyes as she walks backwards until the back of her legs hit her bed. I smirk as I push against her shoulder, and she falls onto the bed, her eyes on me.

“Ares,” she whispers, her tone admonishing.

I smirk as I let my own towel drop to the floor and grab my cock, pumping up and down. “Just looking at you has me hard, baby. You have no idea what you do to me, do you?”

I place my knee between her thighs and lean in as I lift her leg to my lips, placing a soft kiss on her skin. Raven gasps, and the sound is so fucking sweet.

I leave a trail of kisses on the inside of her thigh and inhale deeply as I reach her pussy. “You smell like fucking cupcakes.”

She chuckles, and it’s the first real laugh I’ve heard all night. “It’s the soap I use.”

I look at her and press a kiss right on top of her pussy, loving the way she bites down on her lip. “You’re already wet for me, aren’t you, baby?”

I part her legs wider and drag my tongue up, until I’ve got it pressed against her clit. Raven covers her mouth with one hand and buries the other in my hair.

“Ares,” she groans. “I need you closer tonight.”

I smile as I kiss her stomach, and then her hipbone, slowly making my way up, until I reach her breasts. “Yeah? Tell me what you want, Raven.”

“I want you to fuck me, Ares. I need you to take me hard and rough. Make it impossible for me to think of anything else.”

I smile as I take her nipple into my mouth and suck down on it. Her words are like fucking music to my ears.

I move up higher and press my cock against her. Raven lifts her hips in an attempt to get me to slide in, and I chuckle. “You want my cock that badly, baby?”

She nods, her hands threading through my hair. I push in slowly, enjoying the way her lips fall open, the way ecstasy overtakes her gaze. “Ares,” she moans, before wrapping a hand over her lips.

“Nah,” I whisper. “I’m not having any of that. I’ll make you scream my name tonight, baby.”

She shakes her head, and I chuckle. Even now, she’s taking into account other people’s feeling. No. Fuck that.

I pull almost all the way out and smirk at her as I thrust into her, hard, the way she likes it. She moans against her hand as her bed hits the wall, and I can’t get enough. I watch her closely as I do it all over again, loving the way she tries to stay in control of her pleasure and fails.

“You know what?” I murmur, pulling out of her. She whimpers, and I laugh as I turn her over. “Get on your hands and knees for me, Cupcake.”

She does as I ask, and I lean in, enjoying the way her pussy is on display for me. “I’ve always wanted you this way,” I groan, right before I place my hands on her ass, kneading softly. I lower my lips and taste her, my tongue lapping at her, teasing her clit. The way she moans is fucking magical. I smirk as I push two fingers into her while I continue to torture

her clit, enjoying the way her moans get louder when I find her g-spot. I'm making it my mission to erase every single bad memory she's got. When she walks into this room, I want her to remember the way I made her pant my name, and nothing else.

Raven's moans come quicker, louder, and I increase my pace, sucking down on her clit when I've got her at the edge. That does it for her, and she comes all over my tongue, my name on her lips.

I pull away and rise to my feet before I lift her into my arms. I push her against the wall, and she wraps her legs around me. "I need you, Raven," I tell her as I guide my cock into her pussy.

I thrust into her hard, the sounds we're making disturbing the silence in her quiet room. "Oh God, Ares," she moans as she tightens her legs around my waist.

I hold on to her hips tightly as I fuck her hard, fast, making her take all of me.

"It's too deep," she pants.

"No," I tell her. "You can take it, baby. Look at how well you're taking my cock."

"Oh God," she whispers, her head falling back.

I smirk and lean in, kissing her exposed neck, earning myself another moan from her. I suck down on her neck, leaving a small mark.

"When you moan like that, I can't hold it, baby. You drive me fucking insane."

I pull away a little to look at her. The desire in her eyes, the way her lips are slightly parted, her pupils dilated. "You're the sexiest fucking thing I've ever seen, and I will never get enough of you."

"Ares," she groans, and I fuck her harder, taking her roughly, without mercy, without any regard for the noise we're making. The angle I'm taking her at has me rubbing against her g-spot, and the way she's moaning for me tells me I've got her close.

"I love you," I whisper. "I fucking love you with all I am, Raven."

She looks into my eyes with so much love in her expression that I can barely take it. "I love you more, Ares."

"Fuck," I groan, unable to take it for even a moment longer. I come deep inside her, my forehead dropping against her. "I'm not done with you," I warn her. "There's no fucking way I'll let you fall asleep tonight."

She giggles, and it’s the first genuinely happy sound that’s come out of her mouth since we got here. I’ll do anything to replicate it.

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Chapter Fifty-Four

ARES

I smile at one of Raven's cousins as he tells me all about this supposedly brilliant idea he has for a TV show he thinks I should create. I don't have the heart to tell him that I neither write nor direct them. I'm merely the investor behind it all.

"And then the spaceship explodes," he says, mimicking the sounds loudly in the busy garden.

I nod, barely paying attention. "I think something like that already exists, Nick." Pretty sure what he's describing to me is the plot to Star Wars with some minor tweaks.

"Yeah, but this is better."

Hannah walks over to me and rolls her eyes at him. "Stop harassing Ares," she says as she holds up a beer for me. The circles underneath her eyes make me wonder if she heard us last night. Somehow, I doubt she'd be smiling at me this way if she had, but then again, no one can put up an act like Hannah does.

"Just giving him some good ideas. You'll thank me when Raven and Ares become filthy rich."

Hannah winces, and I take a swig of my beer. "My wife and I are already rich, buddy. I'll take your ideas under consideration, though. Thank you."

He nods and walks off, no doubt in search of another victim to subject to his boring stories. “Don’t mind him,” Hannah tells me, her arm brushing against mine.

I take a step away from her and nod, my eyes on Raven. “It’s truly over between us, isn’t it?” she asks, following my gaze.

I nod. “It is.”

She sighs and runs a hand through her hair. “For so long, I was certain that you’d want to be with me in three years. I must’ve been insane to think you’d stay away from Raven the entire time, that nothing would happen between you two. I trusted you both too much. I always knew she secretly had a thing for you, but you… I didn’t think you’d ever reciprocate those feelings. I didn’t think you’d ever see her as anything but my little sister.”

I glance at her. “She’s my wife,” I remind her. “You act like she and I betrayed you when you’re the one who walked away. You can’t begrudge us our happiness when you’re the one who pushed us together.”

“You’ve always wanted her, haven’t you?”

I look up at her in surprise. “What?”

She huffs and looks away. “Don’t even bother denying it. Do you know how many times I heard you moan her name in your sleep? Did you really think I didn’t realize you were dreaming about her?” She runs a hand through her hair. “If I’m truly honest, that’s one of the reasons I couldn’t go through with it. I always felt like I stole you from her, since she was always meant to be your fiancee. I can see it, you know? I can see why your grandmother picked her, and not me. The two of you have always had a bond that made me jealous. It still does.”

Raven’s eyes meet mine from across the garden, but she looks away almost immediately.

“I’m sorry it didn’t work out between us,” I tell her. “But I’m not sorry for moving on and finding the happiness we never would’ve had together. I hope you find your own happiness too, Hannah.”

“I won’t,” she tells me. “No one can make me as happy as you do, Ares. Despite everything that happened, despite the fact that you’re married to my sister, I still want you.”

I watch as Raven walks into the house, her shoulders slumped. What’s wrong? Why does she look so upset? Is it something I’ve done? Fuck. I shouldn’t have spoken to Hannah at all.

I put my beer down and move to follow her. “Excuse me,” I tell Hannah.

“Ares!” she calls, surprised, but I ignore her. I need to get to my Cupcake and figure out what’s wrong.

She disappears around the corner and I rush after her, just about catching the door to the guest bathroom before she closes it. She looks up in surprise, her eyes wide. “Ares?”

I smirk as I walk into the bathroom with her and close the door behind us.

“What are you—” I grab her and turn us over, so I’ve got her pressed against the door. I grab her roughly and tip her face up toward mine, my lips coming down on hers. She moans when I kiss her, and I push against her hard, letting her feel my rapidly hardening cock.

“I can’t keep my eyes off you in this pretty white dress,” I groan against her lips. My left hand moves underneath her dress, as I tilt her head, placing my lips against her neck, right in that spot underneath her ear.

“You’re wearing panties, huh?”

She chuckles as her hands start to roam over my body. I fucking love how much she always wants me. “It seemed appropriate,” she tells me, “being at my parents’ house and all.”

I turn her over and make her face the mirror above the sink as I position myself behind her. “Baby,” I whisper into her ear. “There’s nothing appropriate about what I’m going to do to you.”

I lift her dress up and slide my hand into her panties, enjoying the feel of her smooth skin. A dark chuckle escapes my lips when I realize that she’s already wet for me.

“You’re such a good little slut for me, Raven. Always so wet, so needy.”

I bury my free hand in her hair and tilt her neck, kissing her in every spot I know is sensitive while my fingers work her pussy.

I slip two fingers into her while my thumb rests against her clit. She starts to move her hips against me, and I chuckle as she rides my hand. “Look at you,” I whisper. “Desperate for my cock in your parents’ guest bathroom, a house full of people surrounding us. But you don’t care, do you? You’re going to come for me nonetheless.”

I chuckle and pull my fingers away. “Ares,” she groans, her eyes flashing with impatience.

I unbuckle my belt and undo my jeans impatiently. My cock is so fucking hard that restraining it hurts. “I need your pussy,” I tell her. “Lift your dress.”

She does as I tell her to, and I push her panties all the way to the side before pushing into her in one quick move.

“Oh God,” she moans loudly. It’s fucking music to my ears. The way she moans, the way she looks at me through the mirror. It’s fucking unreal.

I smile as I move my arm around her and place my fingers back on her pussy, teasing her clit while I fuck her from behind. “Do you have any idea how fucking sexy you look, baby? My cock is sliding in and out of your pussy so fucking beautifully. You’re taking my cock like such a good fucking girl, my love.”

I increase the intensity on her clit, and her moans come quicker, loudly. I can’t get enough of her. “Ares,” she begs.

“Fucking hell, Raven. I can’t take it when you moan my name like that.”

I fuck her harder, pushing her to the edge.

“Yes,” she moans. “Oh God, *yes*.”

I watch her in the mirror as she comes for me, her eyes falling closed as pure bliss takes over her face. Her pussy tightens so fucking hard that I can’t help but come right along with her. “Fuck, Raven,” I groan. I pull her head back and kiss her, not wanting to pull out of her just yet.

Raven pulls away, her cheeks flushed and the sexiest just-fucked look on her face. Fucking hell. I just had her, and I already want more.

I wrap my hands around her panties and push them down her thighs until they fall to the floor. I reach for them as I pull my trousers back up, and she watches me as I lift them to my face, inhaling deeply before I put them in the inside pocket of my suit jacket. “You’re going to walk around without them,” I tell her. “And each time you feel my cum drip down your thighs, I want you the remember how much I fucking want you. I’ve never wanted anyone the way I want you, Raven. I’ve never loved anyone the way I love you. You’re it for me. No matter what.”

I press a kiss to her cheek before I slip out of the bathroom, giving her a moment to catch her breath. I can’t wipe the smile off my face as I close the door behind me.

I’m on such a fucking high that not even the fact that Hannah is standing right around the corner can ruin my mood. I smile at her as I walk

past her, entirely unaffected by the torment I see in her eyes.

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Chapter Fifty-Five

RAVEN

I stare at myself in the mirror, taking in the smeared lipstick, my messy hair and clothes. I'd been so annoyed watching Hannah follow him around the garden, and he turned my mood around just like that. He knew exactly what I needed without me even saying a word.

I try my hardest to fix my appearance, but no matter what I do, I look like I just had a quickie with my husband. I suppose it's the smile that I can't suppress.

I'm strangely giddy as I slip out of the bathroom, but my mood drops instantly when I find Hannah leaning against the wall. She looks at me with such hatred in her eyes that I find myself frozen in place.

"It wasn't enough that you stole him from me, huh? You just had to fuck him all night knowing I could hear you two." She waves her hand in my direction. "And now this? You just had to steal his attention away when we were finally having a civil conversation. What is it that you're trying to do? Did you want to show me how much he wants you? Do you want to rub in that I lost him?"

I lean back against the closed bathroom door and shake my head. "No, Hannah. I would never knowingly do that to you. I tried to be quiet last night, and just now… well, it had nothing to do with you. I went inside and Ares followed me. You could've stopped him if you wanted to."

She laughs humorlessly. “Are you fucking kidding me right now? You fucking bitch. I don’t understand why everyone always thinks you’re so sweet and innocent, when you’re a vicious fucking slut.”

I smile at her, barely able to restrain my anger. “Hmm, you might be onto something there. Ares does call me his little slut, after all.” Her eyes widen as though she can’t believe I just said that, and I merely shrug. “I’m done indulging you. You put me through hell for years, and I always gave in, because that’s just how it’s always been between us. Not anymore, Hannah. Walking away from Ares is the best thing you ever could’ve done for me, but it’s also the worst thing you ever could’ve done *to* me. Your blatant disregard for my happiness and my plans for my future is disgusting. I’m done hoping that someday, you’ll go back to being the big sister I once looked up to.”

She looks hurt for a moment, but her pain rapidly makes way for anger. “Don’t give me that shit,” she tells me. “Don’t try to change the subject and shift the blame.”

I cross my arms and stare her down. “I wouldn’t dare. That’s *your* area of expertise, after all.”

She grits her teeth. “Tell me honestly, Raven. Why did you take my place on my wedding day? We both know Grandma Anne would’ve allowed us to postpone the wedding if you hadn’t. Despite her threats, she’d never have forced you. She loves you far too much to do that to you.”

I nod. “I know.”

Her eyes widen. “Then why?”

“Because I’ve been in love with him for years. Ever since an engagement between him and me was first discussed. My feelings never wavered. I’ve loved him since before you even met him. My biggest regret in life was introducing you two, so when I was given a chance to remedy that, I took it. Can you really blame me for chasing my dreams by walking down that aisle, when walking away from it allowed you to chase yours?”

“You disgust me,” she tells me, her eyes flashing with genuine hurt. “All these years, you lusted after my fiancé, spending time with him, pretending to be his friend, when all along, you wanted him. Was it ever more than that? Did you two ever cross the line?”

I think back to the way I sat in his lap, the way I tried to seduce him. “No,” I tell her. “Ares never crossed the line with me. Not even once.”

I did, though. *I* crossed the line with *him*. I'm guilty of what she's accusing me of, but admitting that now would only further deteriorate what's left of our relationship.

"Hannah, why are you chasing after him when you're the one who left him at the altar? Why do you continuously attempt to get between us even though we're *married*? Do I truly mean nothing to you? Does my happiness truly not matter to you?"

Some of the venom in her eyes drains away, and she looks away. "I want you to be happy, Raven. But not with the man I love. Not with the man I planned a future with and share a past with."

I stare at my sister, my heart breaking. "But I am, Hannah. I'm happy with him, and I think he's happy with me too. Can't you see that?" I tuck a strand of my hair behind my ear and inhale shakily. "Over the last few months, you and I have destroyed the strenuous relationship we had, and what for? I won't leave him, Hannah. Even if I tried, he wouldn't let me. He loves me just as much as I love him. You realize that, don't you?"

"Love," she repeats, followed by a hollow laugh. "Are you seriously standing here and telling me he fell in love with your after, what? Four, five months of marriage? Don't be ridiculous. This is a rebound, and I'll let him have it, but it'll never be more than that."

I inhale shakily and look away. "Maybe you're right," I admit. "But even so, I'm his wife. I'll be his wife for at least the next two and a half years, but we both know it'll be far longer than that. Even if you're right, and what he feels for me isn't true love… then that's fine for me, Hannah. I love him enough to wait until he eventually truly loves me back."

She stares at me in disbelief.

"I'm sorry," I tell her.

"No," she says. "You're not sorry."

"Hannah," I say, my voice breaking. "Do you want me in your life? Because this road you and I are walking… if we see this through, there's no going back. I love you, Han. You know that I do. But I won't sacrifice any more for you."

She rolls her eyes. "You say that as though you've ever had to sacrifice anything for me at all."

I smile at her, my heart wrenching. "You wouldn't be standing here today if I hadn't sacrificed anything for you. Similarly, I wouldn't exist without you. We both know that Mom and Dad only had me because they

needed my bone marrow to save your life. I've spent my entire life living in your shadow, Hannah, giving into anything you wanted, supporting you in any way I could think of, even if it meant making myself small and invisible. I'm done. I'm done being taken for granted. I'm done being pushed around. I love you, but I can't have you in my life if all you bring me is sorrow."

Hannah looks at me and inhales shakily. "You're right," she says. "I'll never forgive you for going after Ares the way you did, Raven. I won't give up on him either. If that means that I'll have to sacrifice my relationship with you, then so be it. Let's be real. We both hate each other anyway. The only reason we tolerate each other is because we have to."

My heart clenches painfully, and I inhale sharply. I always suspected that she hated me, but I tried so hard to convince myself that it was all in my head, that my own sister couldn't possibly feel that way about me.

"I loved you," I tell her, my voice breaking. "I'm pretty sure I loved you from the moment I took my first breath, and I'll love you until I take my last. It kills me that you don't feel the same way, but at least I know now." I take a step away, taking one last look at my sister. "You're toxic, Hannah. Not just to me, but to yourself. It isn't just me you're losing today, you know? With each passing day, you lose more of yourself, too. But you know what? It isn't my job to save you. Not anymore."

I force myself to walk away from my sister, knowing deep down that I should've done it long ago.

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Chapter Fifty-Six

ARES

I lean back on our new sofa, feeling at home in my own house for the first time in years. It took us a few months, but we've made this our home, down to every last detail. Spending my weekends shopping for decoration has been far more fun that I ever thought it could be. Being with someone who actually values my opinion and doesn't always want to get her way has been insanely refreshing.

I sigh as I stare at the clock in the living room. The only thing that's missing tonight is Raven. She's been working late every night this week. If she isn't shooting some campaign, she's working on her fashion designs or accompanying Grandma and Sierra to their countless charity functions. She's the hardest working woman I've ever met, and fuck, I'm proud of her… but I miss her too.

I grab my phone and scroll through her Instagram pictures, just to catch another glimpse of her, and it only takes me three seconds to get pissed off at all the comments men are leaving under her photos. Fucking assholes. Don't they know she's married?

I grit my teeth and navigate to my own account. I don't manage it myself, and my team mostly posts about movie productions we're funding, with the odd Windsor family event thrown in to give me a more human touch. I've never had any interest in it. Even though I work in the media

industry, I've always found social media toxic. Lately, though… I've definitely taken more of an interest in my social media accounts since I married Raven, and the press has had a field day with me because of it. Each time I post a photo of us, it ends up going viral.

I smirk and pull up my favorite photo of my wife. It's one of the first ones I took of her, the one where she's sleeping, her shoulders exposed. It's an obvious post-sex photo, but I don't give a fuck. It's my intention to lay my claim, after all.

I smirk as I upload the photo and caption it with two words: *my wife.* 😍

I'm still chuckling when I hear the front door open. Raven smiles the moment she sees me, and I meet her halfway, kissing her far rougher than I probably should have. I love how she always instantly wraps her arms around me, no matter where we are or who's watching. The way she responds to me is never dictated by the people that surround us.

"Hey... why are you smiling like that?"

"Check your Instagram. I tagged you in a post." Her eyes roam over my face, and she tilts her head suspiciously.

Raven frowns as she reaches into her bag, and for a moment, I wonder if perhaps I overstepped by posting what I did. But then she smiles and blushes a deep crimson.

"Ares," she says, her voice husky. Fuck. She's so fucking sexy. Even the way she says my name is fucking perfection. "You're crazy, aren't you?"

I shrug. "Maybe a little."

Her smile fades, the way it does whenever she thinks of Hannah. Rave has been carrying a lot more guilt than I have, and her last argument with Hannah broke her heart. It was easier for me to draw a line with Hannah than it'll ever be for Raven.

"You've been working far too hard lately, and you know it's serious when it's coming from me."

She nods and rubs her shoulder. "I know," she murmurs.

I cup her cheek gently and sigh. She's overworking herself in an effort to forget about the pain Hannah has caused. It's what I always used to do, so I get it, but it isn't healthy. "I've got something for you," I tell her. "Come to the kitchen with me."

She nods. "I have to wash off all this stage makeup on my body," she tells me. "Give me a minute, and I'll meet you in the kitchen, okay?"

I press a kiss to her forehead and she walks away, her entire posture betraying the sorrow that weighs her down. I can't help but feel guilty for the role I played in their fall-out. How do I take away her worries, her pain? Should I have tried harder to keep Hannah in our lives? Should we have hidden the fact that our marriage isn't just one of convenience, to give Hannah some more time to work through our separation? Would that have been better?

I glance at my phone and open up my inbox, my eyes pausing on the dozens of unopened messages from Hannah. Should I have tried harder to stay friends with her? I don't want to be the reason Raven loses her sister. She's already given up so much for both Hannah and me, and I don't understand how Hannah doesn't see that. The fact that Raven found a hint of happiness despite the choice Hannah made doesn't invalidate her sacrifice.

I grab the cupcake I had flown in from Paris and place it on the counter with a smile on my face. Raven walks in moments later, her hair wet and a silk robe loosely tied around her. I wonder if she'll ever cease to mesmerize me. Will I ever be able to watch her walk into a room without my entire damn body reacting?

"Come here." I hold my hand out, and she takes it, her fingers curling around mine.

"You didn't eat today, did you?"

She shakes her head.

"How much did you work out today?"

"About three hours in total."

I wrap my arms around her waist and lift her on top of the kitchen counter. "Baby," I whisper. "You can't keep doing this. It isn't healthy, and I can't stand seeing you this way. You're starving and overworking yourself. What for?"

She shakes her head and cups my cheek, her eyes on mine. "I know," she murmurs. "I have contracts I don't want to walk away from, Ares, because all of these companies are also my peers when it comes to running my own fashion line."

I drop my forehead to her chest and sigh. If I beg her to stop, would she? Do I even have the right to ask something like that of her?

She wraps her arms around my neck and rests her chin on top of my head. "I'm going to quit modeling soon," she says, and I look up sharply.

She smiles at me and buries a hand in my hair. “I worked as hard as I did because it’s all I had. I used it as an escape, Ares, but I no longer need to. My life is no longer empty, and I no longer crave the validation my career used to give me. I’m going to shift my focus and go all-in with my fashion line. I think I might also want to take an interest in Windsor Media, if that’s okay?”

I grin at her. “I’d love nothing more. You and I would do amazing things together, Rave. We could bring your fashion line under the Windsor umbrella too, so we can push more funding into it.”

She nods, a sweet serene smile on her face. Raven lifts her hand and leisurely trails a finger across my forehead, down my nose, and over my lips. “What’s wrong?” she asks. “You don’t seem happy. I don’t have to join you at Windsor Media, you know? I’m happy to just do my own thing.”

I tighten my grip on her waist and shake my head. “No, that’s not it. Not at all. I’d love nothing more than partnering up with you, Rave.” I hesitate for a moment. “It’s just… do you remember that night you got drunk, and I picked you up at the bar? You said something that night that I can’t get out of my mind. That night when I gave you your new tablet too, you mentioned working as an escape. You were clearly trying to get someone out of your system, and I need to know… are you over him now?”

Her eyes widen, and then she looks away. “No,” she says, her smile bittersweet. Her eyes find mine, and she leans in, the back of her hand brushing over my cheek. “I don’t think I’ll ever get over you, Ares.”

“What?”

She chuckles and tilts her head, a vulnerable expression on her face. “It’s always been you. Maybe it’s wrong and fucked up, but I wanted you long before you were mine. I loved you long before I said *I do*.”

I grab her chin and lean in, my touch desperate as I kiss her. I’ve never needed anyone to feel my love quite so badly. “Ares,” she groans, her legs tightening around my waist.

I pull away and grin as I reach around her and grab the cupcake I bought her. “Eat this,” I tell her as I drop to my knees between her legs. “You have your cake,” I murmur as I part her robe, “and I’ll have mine.”

I kiss the inside of her thigh, pleased to find that she isn’t wearing anything underneath her robe. Raven moans when I kiss her pussy, and I smirk as I look up at her to find her staring at me with fire in her eyes.

“Finish every last bite of that, and I’ll make you come. The longer you take to eat it, the longer I’ll torture you.”

I chuckle as she buries one hand in my hair while she brings her other hand to her face, taking a bite of her cupcake just as my tongue parts her folds, going straight for her clit. I’m fucking obsessed with her, and each and every day, I’m going to ensure that everything we lost along the way was worth it.

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Chapter Fifty-Seven

ARES

I'm reluctant as I walk over to Zane's house. If the boys hadn't warned me that they'd throw me out of our poker club if I didn't show, I'd have stayed home with my wife.

We usually meet once a month to play poker and catch up, but I've been skipping it ever since I got married to Raven. It's odd how hard I find it to leave her for even just a single night. I want to be around her every second of every day, and even then, it isn't enough.

I bite down on my lip, wondering if I should just lose tonight so I can go back home to my wife as soon as possible. I suspect they'd see straight through me, and I'd never hear the end of it.

I pause halfway toward Zane's front door and frown at the figure darting through the trees. "The fuck are you doing, Xavier?"

I watch him as he glances around before jogging my way. "Can't be too careful," he says, smiling. "I'm fucking dead if your sister catches me here. She's been extra strange lately. Best not to provoke her."

I shake my head as we walk to Zane's door. He presses his finger to the scanner, and the door opens. Sierra would lose her shit if she knew Xavier is close enough to us for his biometrics to be in our system. "At some point, my sister is going to find out that all of her brothers are friends with you, and there'll be hell to pay for all of us."

Xavier looks horrified at the mere thought of it, and I can't help but chuckle. "Xavier fucking Kingston. Billionaire. Real estate magnate. *Pussy*."

He shoots me a glance. "Your sister is fucking psychotic, mate. I don't doubt that she'd try to fucking gut me if she caught me here. Did I tell you she sent me a fucking fish bomb last week?"

We walk into Zane's living room, where the rest of the boys are all set up. The only one we're missing is Luca. "What the fuck is a fish bomb?"

"She sent me smoke bombs that smelled like dead fish. My entire goddamn office reeked for a full week."

I raise my brow. "The hell did you do to her?"

He runs his hand through his hair and shakes his head. "Fuck if I know. It arrived shortly after that charity gala I threw."

I smile then. "The one you took a date to? You created a PR nightmare for me with that bullshit. Why the fuck did you bring that girl if you didn't want it blasted all over the gossip papers? You never bring a date, Xav, so you should've known that the first time you do would attract attention."

He hesitates and looks away, piquing my curiosity. "She's special to you, huh?" My smile drops at the thought of it. My brothers and I have always been certain that the hatred between Xavier and Sierra was really just thinly veiled love. Looks like we were wrong. I clear my throat and look away.

Lexington walks up to us, a concerned look on his face. "Does Sierra know about this girl?" he asks.

Xavier frowns. "She saw me with Valeria at the gala, but I don't see how that matters."

"Valeria," I murmur. He says her name so reverently. It's no wonder Sierra sent him a stink bomb.

Zane looks at me, and I shake my head. I don't know who she is either. She showed up on Xavier's arm two weeks ago, and none of us had ever heard of her before.

"So who is she?" Zane asks. "I remember seeing her. She's beautiful, that's for sure."

Xavier turns around to face Zane, a chilling smile on his face. "Stay away from her," he warns. "Don't fuck with me, Zane. I don't want any of you anywhere near her."

"Hmm," Zane says. "You're protective of her, huh?"

Lexington and I glance at each other before mutually agreeing to let it go. In the end, Sierra's match will be decided by Grandma, anyway. Perhaps this is for the best, after all.

I walk toward the table and grab Zane's deck of cards, shuffling it absentmindedly. I'll have to tell my wife about this. I wonder what she'll think of it. I know she also thought there was something between Xavier and Sierra.

Luca walks in, stumbling, a bottle of scotch in his hands. I can't remember the last time I saw Luca drunk. He doesn't like to lose control, and excessive drinking is one of those things he hates doing.

"Luca," Zane calls. "You alright?"

Zane slams his bottle down on the poker table and sits down, a humorless laugh escaping his lips. "Of course I'm fine," he snaps. "Why wouldn't I be fine? I can do without her. I don't fucking need her."

Lexington glances at me in question, but I've got no idea what's going on either. Usually I'm the one that stays on top of my brothers' bullshit so I can prevent scandals, but I've been preoccupied with my wife. "Is this about your fiancee?" I ask, confused.

He looks up at me. "I can't even remember that girl's fucking name," he snaps.

"Valentina," Xavier says, a knowing look in his eyes. "This is about Valentina."

Luca looks up, his gaze filled with torment. "She left me."

Lex frowns. "What do you mean, she *left* you? Did you… were you two seeing each other, or something?"

Luca waves his hand in irritation. "No, of course not. It's *Valentina*. I wouldn't… I'd never risk it. Not when I don't know if I'd be able to marry her. She… she quit her job, man."

I sit down next to Luca and lean back, shocked. "She's been with you for what? Eight years?"

He nods. "Yep. Fresh out of college, both of us. I just thought that… I don't know, man. I don't know what I was thinking."

Xavier starts to tidy the table, clearing away the poker chips while Zane hands each of us a glass before pouring Luca's scotch into them. "We'll need ice," he says matter-of-factly.

"We'll need a whole lot more than that," Lex adds.

"Did she tell you why she quit?" Xavier asks.

Luca chuckles darkly. “Said she wanted a fresh start and a life of her own. She feels like she’s given me too much, and she doesn’t want to spend the best years of her life overworking herself for someone who doesn’t appreciate her.” He runs a hand through his hair. “Can you believe that? I gave her a house of her own and a company car. She’s even got a driver and bodyguards. She’s one of the highest fucking paid employees in the company, man. There’s nothing I haven’t given her. How fucking dare she claim that I don’t appreciate her?” He looks up at the ceiling for a moment. “I don’t get it. I asked her to send some flowers to my fiancee, and she just quit, right there and then. For years, she’s been sending flowers to Raven and Sierra on their birthdays and special occasions, but now it’s suddenly beneath her?”

I smile at him and shake my head. “You’re a fucking idiot, aren’t you?”

He looks at me so fucking helplessly, and I bite back a smile as I throw Zane a look. He smirks back at me.

“I suppose it’s good for her, though,” Zane says. “She should go on some dates, find someone to settle down with. She’s right, you know? Val has been overworking herself. You’ve got her on call 24/7, and she barely has a social life of her own. She attends family dinner with us more often than she sees her own family, because you can’t fucking function without her. I hope she finds a wonderful man to marry. Maybe have a baby or two.”

The fucking horror on Luca’s face makes it hard to keep a straight face, but somehow, we all manage it. Luca rises to his feet in a rush, his chair clattering to the floor loudly. “Get me a driver,” he tells me. “I need to go somewhere.”

Zane nods and grabs his phone, a small smile on his face. Meanwhile, Xavier just looks on, confused.

Luca rushes out the door, and Xavier turns to us. “I thought all of your engagements were decided by your grandmother? How is sending him onto this path even remotely a good idea?”

I cross my arms and shake my head. “Grandma is wrong about Luca,” I tell him. “She might have gotten it right for Raven and me, but she nearly got it really fucking wrong. There’s no way Luca and Valentina don’t belong together. Everyone can see it but them.”

He looks worried, and in all honesty, I share his concerns. When it comes to them, though, this is a risk worth taking. If he doesn’t act now,

there’s a chance he’ll lose her. But if he does? He could end up having everything he’s ever wanted.

I should know.

I feel the same way about Raven.

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Chapter Fifty-Eight

RAVEN

I drop my head to Ares's shoulder and snuggle closer on the sofa. I'm drawing on my tablet as he reviews documents on his laptop, yet I'm filled with such happiness tonight. It's the simple things I love most with him.

"Mr. and Mrs. Windsor?"

We both sit up in surprise when one of our bodyguards walks in. Our staff is usually so invisible that it's easy to forget they're there at all. They never enter the house when we're at home.

"What is it, Ben?" Ares asks.

Ben hesitates for a moment. "Hannah Du Pont is at the gate. We've denied her entry, but she doesn't seem to be in a good state of mind. I would recommend that we let her in before she causes a scene and attracts the media."

Ares looks at me, and I nod. If what he's saying is true, something is really wrong. Hannah would never risk causing a scene otherwise. She cares more about her reputation than she's ever cared about either of us.

"Let her in," I say.

I grab my phone and pull up the cameras. The gates at the front of the mansion swing open, and she drives through. It'll only take her a few minutes to get to our house, and the closer she gets, the more apprehension fills me. I have a bad feeling about this.

I haven’t spoken a word to her since I asked her if she wanted me in her life, and I didn’t think I ever would again. Not truly. I anticipated seeing her at social events, but this? I didn’t expect her to show up at our house ever again.

Hannah looks distraught as she walks in, Ben by her side. She pauses and looks around, her face betraying her shock. “I see you renovated the place,” she says, her tone soft and matter-of-fact. The venom I expected isn’t there, and it makes me feel uneasy. Considering the way we fell out, there’s no way she could be standing in front of me now without an ulterior motive.

She walks up to us and sits down on the sofa next to the one we’re on, her gaze moving between Ares and me. Trepidation runs down my spine when she clasps her hands nervously.

Normally, she can’t take her eyes off Ares. This time, she’s looking at *me*, with something that looks a whole lot like remorse in her gaze.

“I’m sorry to drop by unannounced,” she says, her head bowed. Her eyes fill with tears, and she inhales shakily. The way she wraps her arms around herself makes her look so vulnerable, but I’m convinced it’s all an act. I should’ve known she wouldn’t let me walk away so easily — not with both Ares and our parents’ company.

“I… there’s no easy way to say this.” She raises her head and looks into my eyes. “I’m… I’m pregnant.”

She’s… *what*? My heart drops, and nausea hits me hard, her words replaying through my mind. Fear unlike anything I’ve ever known holds me captive as I stare at my sister. She looks so apologetic, but I recognize that glint in her eyes. It’s how she always looked at me when she pretended to feel sorry for the way Mom favored her over me.

I wrap my arms around myself and take a steadying breath. This can’t be happening.

Her gaze shifts to Ares. “I’m five months along. The baby is, of course, yours.”

Ares tenses beside me and reaches for my hand, entwining our fingers before he places our joined hands in his lap. It’s clear that he’s in as much disbelief as I am.

“I didn’t realize it for the longest time. You know how irregular my periods are, Ares. It isn’t until I started to gain weight inexplicably that I thought of doing a pregnancy test. I’ve had no symptoms whatsoever. No

morning sickness, no indications at all. I wasn't even showing until two weeks ago. I… it's a high-risk pregnancy, Ares, and I just… I need you. I can't do this by myself, and I'm scared."

Ares's free arm wraps around my shoulder, and he squeezes tightly, our hands still entwined in his lap. I'm scared to even look at him for fear that it's happiness I'll find written all over his face. Five months… that means he slept with her days before we got married. Or shortly *after*. I bite down on my lip harshly as I try my best to control my breathing. I can feel panic rising from my chest, threatening to overwhelm me. Did he cheat on me?

Ares lets go of my hand and grabs his phone. He starts to type before he makes a call. "I need a doctor," he snaps. "Send a doctor to my home within the next ten minutes."

Hannah's eyes widen. "You don't believe me?" she asks, shocked.

Ares smiles tightly. "Just covering my bases," he explains. "If you're carrying my child, it's important that we check your health, isn't it? Especially if it truly is a high-risk pregnancy."

His fingers draw circles on my shoulder, no doubt in an effort to reassure me, but nothing can calm my pounding heart. How could she be pregnant? What does this mean for us? My thoughts are whirling, and I try my hardest to fight the lightheadedness I feel. I can't afford to panic right now. I can see the life I wanted with Ares slip away as Hannah claws her way back into our lives, smothering me.

The doctor arrives, and I rise to my feet, impatient to get to the heart of this. Does hoping that she isn't pregnant make me a horrible person? Ares and I have finally found true happiness together, and this… this will tear us apart. It was near impossible to focus on my marriage and chase my own happiness throughout the last few months. How much harder is she going to make it for us once a child is involved?

"Raven," Ares says, reaching for me. He places his hands on my shoulders and squeezes tightly. "I'm yours, no matter what. There's nothing you and I can't get through, and this is no different."

"How is this not different, Ares?" I ask, distraught. "It's a child. An *innocent* life."

He cups my cheek and nods. "Yeah, it is. But let's take this one step at a time, okay?"

He thinks she's lying, but I know she isn't. Hannah is too smart to do something like that. I sit down in defeat when the doctor walks in with a

grim expression. He glances at Ares and nods.

“She’s five months pregnant. The baby is healthy, but the mother is under too much duress. She’s been battling anxiety and insomnia. Her blood pressure is far higher than I’d like it to be too. You’ll need to take good care of her.”

I stare down at my wedding ring in resignation. She said he’ll end up coming back to her, and she was right. As the mother of his child, there’s no escaping her.

What does this even mean for us? Would this child be my niece or nephew *and* my stepchild? Would we co-parent? Or… would he want to give their relationship another shot for the sake of their child? I know how much family means to him. He wouldn’t want his son or daughter to grow up in a broken home. He won’t accept only being able to see his child on weekends.

“Raven?”

I look up to find the doctor has left the room. How long have I been sitting on the sofa, trapped in my thoughts?

“Where is Hannah?”

“She’s lying down in the guest room.” Ares kneels in front of the sofa and grabs my hands, holding on tightly. “Are you okay?”

I look into his eyes and force a smile on my face. “Congratulations,” I say, my voice breaking. “You’re going to be a father.” I swallow down my sorrow and inhale shakily. I’ve dreamed of saying those very same words to him someday, but it’d be me who was pregnant. Having a family with Ares is something I’ve only just started to dream of, and it feels like she’s stolen yet another one of my dreams.

I pull my hand out of his and cross my arms as I stare out the window behind him, my heart bleeding. “Did you cheat on me, Ares?”

He cups my cheek and turns my face back to his. “No,” he says, looking into my eyes. He looks as tormented as I feel. “Never. I never will either. This won’t change anything for us unless you want it to.”

I stare at him, taking in his sharp jaw and those beautiful green eyes. Will his child have his eyes? His smile?

“Give me a moment of honesty, Ares. Do you *want* this to change things between us? Are you phrasing it that way because you want me to be the bigger person and walk away? Are you asking me to do what you won’t, so

you don’t have to feel guilty for choosing your child and its mother over me?”

His eyes widen, and he grabs both of my hands. “Moment of honesty,” he replies. “I’m silently praying that you’ll tell me that this doesn’t impact us, and that we’ll find a way to get through this together. I was so proud of you for standing your ground and cutting Hannah off, and now we’re forced to accept her into our lives in ways that we both deemed unimaginable. I’m scared of hurting you, of asking too much. I don’t know what the right thing to do is, so I need you to tell me.”

I nod and look away. “I wish I knew,” I whisper. “I wish I had the right words for you right now, but I don’t. The only thing I do know is that it can’t be the child that suffers. I’ll be there for you, Ares, in whatever capacity you need. I’ll raise this child with you, if that’s what you want. There’s no doubt in my mind that I love you, and though it might be hard, I know I’ll love your daughter or son the same. What I don’t know is if I can survive having Hannah in our lives.”

He nods and lays his head on my lap, his arms wrapped around my waist. I should’ve known better than to think I finally got my own *Happily Ever After*. Happiness has always been out of reach for me. *Ares* has always been out of reach.

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Chapter Fifty-Nine

ARES

I look up when Hannah walks into our kitchen, dark circles underneath her eyes. I stare at her in disbelief. Is she truly carrying my child? She was so adamant that we wouldn't have children for at least a couple more years, so how could this have happened? *When* did this happen? In the weeks leading up to our wedding, all we did was argue. I can't even remember the last time I slept with her. It only could've been that one time that I got drunk shortly after I had Raven in my lap. I woke up with Hannah in my bed, when it's Raven I wanted.

Hannah takes a seat at the breakfast bar, and the smile on her face grates on me. There's something so smug about it, as though she feels like she's won some sort of game. It wouldn't surprise me if that's exactly how it feels for her. All she does is play with people's lives.

"Where is Raven?"

I grit my teeth. I don't like hearing my wife's name come out of her mouth. It raises every protective instinct in me and leaves me feeling helpless. I'd destroy her if I could, but she's become even more untouchable to me now. Not only is she my wife's sister, she's also the mother of my child — supposedly.

"She's at work. She barely slept and rushed out early in the morning."

Hannah nods. “It must be hard for her, to know that we’re having a baby together. I can imagine that now, even more so, she regrets marrying you.”

My heart squeezes painfully as fear nips at me. When I spoke to her, we seemed to be on the same page, but for how long? It took all of her to cut ties with Hannah, and now this? Just being around Hannah breaks Raven’s heart. What will this pregnancy do to her? I’ve never felt this much hatred and helplessness. No amount of power or money can save us from the pain we’re about to face. Can I bear seeing my wife cry herself to sleep each time Hannah hurts her feelings? What if she ends up turning our child against Raven too? It’d break her heart, over and over again, for *years*.

“Are we?” I ask. “Are we having a baby together? Is the child mine?”

Hurt flashes through her eyes, and I sigh. I can’t tell what’s real with her. I have no idea if she’s acting, but I wouldn’t put it past her.

Tears fill her eyes, and she places a hand on her stomach. “Of course, Ares. What… how could you…” she looks away, a tear running down her face. “Raven has truly made you hate me, hasn’t she? How did she do it? How did she unravel a love that lasted years, in the span of a few months?”

I ball my fist as I suppress the urge to snap at her. “She hasn’t,” I say, my voice calm. “No one has the power to make another stop loving someone, Hannah. She didn’t steal me away from you. You and I were done long before you chose to walk away. What you and I had… it was born out of obligation.”

“And what you have with her isn’t?”

I look away and shake my head. “No. It’s different with her. I had no intention of making it work with her. If anything, I wanted to give her as much freedom as she possibly could’ve wanted. I had no expectations when it came to Raven, yet over time, I found myself wanting more and more of her.” I look into her eyes and inhale deeply. “I think you know as well as I do that what I have with her was years in the making. I just didn’t realize it.”

Genuine pain flashes through her eyes, and she flinches. “Is this really what it’s going to be like, Ares? Is our child going to grow up with parents that can’t even have one single conversation that isn’t drenched in mutual resentment?”

I look away, unable to even imagine a future for the four of us. I take a deep breath and push a stack of papers her way.

“If you and I are having a child together, we’ll need to come to an agreement about how we’re raising it.”

She picks up the documents, her eyes widening. “You want to *adopt* the baby?”

I nod. “Let’s be real, Hannah. You can’t raise a child, but I can. Raven and I can. I want full custody, and you’ll get full visitation rights. You’ll be able to continue filming and working. Your life won’t be impacted at all, and our child will be raised in a loving home. He or she won’t lack anything.”

Hannah swipes the papers off the counter, and they go flying before they reach the floor. “I will *never* give up on my child,” she says, her voice breaking. “How could you ask something like that of me?”

“I’m not asking you to give the baby up, Hannah. You’d be able to see our child whenever you wanted. Surely this is in your best interests, too? You’ve always loved your career above all else. This will allow you to see your child without the obligations motherhood would bring you.”

She shakes her head. “Do you think I’m stupid, Ares? Do you really think I’ll let you take away my child? I sign away my rights, and next thing I know, I’m cut out of your lives. I won’t let that happen. Tell me, was that Raven’s idea? Isn’t it enough for her to be a home wrecker? Isn’t it enough that she’s forcing this child to grow up in a broken home?”

“Watch your mouth,” I snap. “I’m fucking sick of you putting words in her mouth and blaming her for things she hasn’t done. You walked away, Hannah. End of story. Raven is my wife, and so help me God, you will respect her. Don’t try this fucking shit with me. She might let you get away with this bullshit, but I won’t. If you’re going to be part of our lives, you’d better learn your fucking place.”

She raises her hands and claps slowly, even as tears stream down her face. “Well done,” she tells me. “You’ve become such a good whipped little puppy. What the hell has she done to you, huh? Do you really think I don’t realize that these aren’t your words? I’ve been with you for years, Ares, and in all that time, you’ve never once spoken to me that way, no matter how bad our arguments got. Yet now, with Raven around, you’re suddenly acting all different, and I’m supposed to believe it isn’t because of her? Is this how our child is going to grow up, Ares? With a father that disrespects their mother because their slut of a stepmom told him to? What else will you do to our child and me just because she tells you to?”

I smile at her humorlessly. “You never fucking knew me at all, Hannah. You wonder why I fell for her so hard, so quickly? It’s because I never loved you in the first place. You were an obligation, someone I tolerated and placated because I had no other choice. I never lost my patience with you because I never truly gave a fuck about you.”

She jumps off her seat and approaches me. “Is that what helps you sleep at night?” she asks, her finger digging into my chest. “Are you truly going to stand here and reduce everything we shared to a mere *obligation*? Is that what our child is to you, too?” She places a hand on her stomach and sniffs. “Does no part of you want to raise this baby with me? Don’t you want what’s best for our child? Are you truly so blinded by Raven that you can’t see how much you’re hurting me? How much your actions will end up hurting our baby? She’ll never love our child the way I’ll love them. How could she possibly accept and love a kid that isn’t hers, that reminds her of your past with me?”

I run a hand through my hair, at a loss. This isn’t how I saw this conversation going. I shouldn’t have lost my patience with her. If I’d acted the way I always used to with her, I might have gotten her to sign.

“Ares,” she says, blinking rapidly. “I… I don’t feel well.”

She scrunches her brows, and then her body sways. I reach for her and pull her into me just as she faints, her body going slack in my embrace.

“Fuck! Get me a doctor!”

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Chapter Sixty

RAVEN

I park my car and stare at the front door, trying to gather the courage to walk in. All day, all I've thought about is Hannah's pregnancy, and what it means for all of us. Now, more so than ever, I'm racked with guilt. It consumes me, spreading its poison until I'm left second-guessing every decision I've made. I've never felt so selfish, so horrible.

When I married Ares, I wondered if there would come a day that I'd regret it. At the time, I convinced myself that what I'd regret most would be the things I didn't do. I couldn't have been more wrong.

Ares and Hannah are going to be a family, whether I like it or not. They'll share an unbreakable bond, and I'll always be a third party. Because of the decision I made, I'm taking away an innocent child's chance to grow up with both of their parents as one united front. If I hadn't married Ares, the two of them would've found out about the pregnancy together, while they were rescheduling their wedding. It would've brought them together, bridging the distance Hannah's career had created over the years. Maybe it still will.

I inhale shakily and open my car door. I've never dreaded coming home as much as I do tonight. No matter what was going on, I'd always been eager to see Ares. Yet tonight I can't face him.

How do I face the man I love, knowing what I did? I chose to marry him knowing that if I hadn't, Grandma would have forgiven Hannah and accepted her into the family, eventually. I came between them because I was selfish, and now I'm paying the price.

I walk into the house I've come to love so much, the home Ares and I built, and it all feels so impermanent. Just as I convinced myself to choose happiness, to put myself first… life showed me that I don't deserve it.

I tense when I hear Grandma's voice, my heart racing. I should've known that it wouldn't take her long to find out about this. No doubt, she'll be excited to welcome her first great-grandchild, and it's going to kill me to watch her fuss over Hannah. It's like every single thing I want out of life can't be mine if it isn't Hannah's first.

I follow Grandma's voice to the guest room and pause in the doorway. Hannah is lying in bed and Ares is seated on the edge of it, one arm around her for support while he holds a glass to her lips. The way he watches her, with such concern… it guts me. The patience he has with her, the care he shows her. It's like I took a trip to the past, back when I was always looking in from the outside.

Grandma stands next to Hannah's bed, arms crossed. "You're carrying my first great-grandchild," she says, her tone soft and sweet. "You need to take good care of yourself, Hannah." She turns to Ares then. "The same goes for you. She's carrying your child, Ares. I know the situation isn't ideal, but we'll make the best of it — as a *family*."

Hannah looks up at her with tears in her eyes. "I came here because I agree, Grandma. I thought my sister and Ares would be the two people that'd be most supportive. I thought I'd be safe from the press here while we try to figure out how our lives are going to change now, but they don't want me here. Ares asked me to leave, and I… I think I should. I never should've come here in the first place."

Grandma pauses for a moment. "The doctor put you on bed rest, Hannah. I'd like you to stay here until you feel better. It'll be good for Ares, Raven, and you to be together. After all, this pregnancy entwines all three of your fates. The more you avoid each other, the bigger the blow-outs when you're eventually forced to face each other. For the sake of my great-grandchild, you need to learn to put aside your differences."

"No," Ares says, his arm slipping away. He puts down the glass he was holding and rises to his feet. "She can't stay here. I understand your

intentions, Grandma, and I agree that we need to learn to co-exist, but now is not the time."

Grandma holds her hand up. "There's no better time than the present, Ares. In a mere four months, you'll be a father. This isn't something you can run away from. This kind of thing is better faced head-on. The three of you need to learn how to co-parent, because your child is going to need you, and you cannot allow him or her to be raised in a hostile environment." She turns to me, and I tense. I didn't even realize she'd noticed me standing here. "Don't you agree, Raven?"

I nod at her and suppress the unwarranted betrayal I feel. She's right, of course, yet somehow I can't accept that she is. I don't want Hannah in my home. I won't survive seeing more moments such as the one I walked in on. I don't want to bear witness to the inevitable rekindling of their relationship.

Ares turns around, his eyes wide. "Baby," he says, walking up to me.

I take a step back and force a smile. "You can have this room," I tell Hannah. She stares at me for a moment before nodding, the edges of her lips turned up into a small smile. Something about the way she looks at me doesn't sit well with me. I suppose it's her mocking gaze, as though she knows she didn't need my acknowledgement or permission when she's got Grandma by her side.

I step away and make my way to my bedroom, my heart in disarray. This is all of my worst nightmares come true. Seeing them together back when Ares and I were nothing but friends was bearable, because I could hide behind our friendship. Now? Now I'll have to watch my husband fall for the woman I tore him away from, all over again.

"Raven!"

I freeze at the sound of Grandma's voice and turn around with a polite smile on my lips. Her gaze roams over my face, her expression worried. "Are you okay, my darling?"

I nod. "Of course."

Grandma looks away. "This is all my fault. I can see you're hurting, Raven. You wouldn't be in this situation if not for me. I'm the one who demanded that you marry Ares, but I should have known that it was too late for the two of you. Throughout the years, fate has brought Hannah and Ares together over and over again. I was foolish to think I could untangle their

destinies. My attempts to do so have harmed you, and for that, I am forever sorry."

I shake my head. "No, Grandma. It's okay, I promise. Ares and I will be okay. You were right about us, and I've never once blamed you for the situation we were put in. If anything, I owe you a great debt for it. The last couple of months have been the happiest I've ever been."

She looks into my eyes, her gaze searching. "But that happiness can't last, Raven. It won't. My sweet girl, do you think I didn't notice the pain in your beautiful eyes each time you were around Hannah and Ares?"

I look away and wrap my arms around myself protectively. Was I so transparent? My mind involuntarily drifts back to Hannah telling me that she and Ares used to joke about my crush on him. Did everyone know?

"I don't want to watch you lose your spirit over the next couple of months or years, Raven. He might be angry and shocked right now, but we both know that his protective instincts will kick in soon enough. It won't take long for him to realize that she truly is carrying his baby. He'd do anything for his child, don't you think? Can you bear watching him worry about her? Will your heart stay intact when he places his hand on her belly to feel the baby kick? All of those moments they'll share that you can't be part of are bound to hurt you."

I draw a shaky breath and lift my face. "Then what would you have me do, Grandma?"

"My sweet girl, I don't know what the right thing to do is, but I want you to think about your own happiness. This isn't what I wanted for you. For years, I watched you wither away because of your love for Ares. I don't want you to go through that again. You should have a love so grand that everything else pales in comparison. You should never come second to anyone else, and you shouldn't have to fight over a man's attention. But that's the fate that awaits you with Ares. Hannah won't let him leave her clutches, and the new bonds between them can't be broken."

She looks away for a moment, her gaze filled with sorrow. "I love you just as much as I love Sierra. I have always seen you as one of my own, Raven. Long before you married Ares, I considered you a Windsor."

Grandma reaches for me and cups my cheek, her thumb swiping away a tear I didn't realize had fallen. "My sweet girl, if you want to be set free, I'll let you go. I'll give you half of Windsor Media and all my support. I never

should have asked you to marry Ares in the first place. Let me right my wrongs, Raven."

I pull away from her, shocked. "Are you asking me to divorce Ares?"

Grandma shakes her head. "No, Raven. I would never ask that of you. I would want nothing more than to keep you in our lives. What I'm asking you to do is to choose yourself. Choose happiness. Prioritize yourself. No one else is going to do it for you, child. It is my hope that you'll think things through and choose Ares regardless, but I want you to know that you have my support if you decide otherwise."

She smiles at me and rises to her tiptoes to kiss my forehead before walking away, leaving me standing here with a thousand doubts whirling through my thoughts.

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Chapter Sixty-One

RAVEN

I feel like a guest in my own home. Ares and I put so much effort into redesigning this place, and for a while, that worked for us. It allowed us to feel like we got a fresh start. Yet now, everywhere I look, I see Hannah.

Within the span of just a few days, she's invaded every aspect of the life that I'd tried to cut her out off. It's in her favorite mug laying in the sink, the new blanket on our sofa, and the countless baby magazines that have been spread through the house. It's almost as though she wants to take every single opportunity she can get to remind me that she's having a child with my husband.

I've barely spoken a word to her since she moved in, and much to my surprise, she hasn't tried to provoke me either. She's stayed out of my way for the most part, shooting me sweet smiles whenever our paths cross.

It just makes me feel that much more awful. I wish she'd lash out at me, so I could justify the hatred I feel. The way she's acting these days reminds me of the past, back when I was so blinded to her venom that I didn't realize she'd brought me to the brink.

"Rave?"

I tense at the sound of her voice. She joins me in the kitchen, her hand on her stomach. "God, I'm just hungry all the time," she grumbles.

I watch as she walks straight over to the fridge and rummages through it. It grates on me for absolutely no reason. She isn't doing anything wrong, yet having her in my home is killing me.

She grabs a box of strawberries and leans back against the counter. "How are you holding up? You've been so quiet."

I lift my coffee cup to my lips and take a sip, forcing myself to stay put when all I want to do is hide in my room. "I'm fine."

Hannah stares at me and nods slowly. "I get it," she says. "It's strange to think that Ares and I are going to be parents. The situation is complicated, for sure. But we'll make the best of it, won't we? We always do."

I nod, feeling oddly conflicted. Over the last couple of months she's been so antagonistic that I hardly know how to deal with her she's like this.

"Ares and I are getting an ultrasound soon to check if we can find out the gender. Do you want to come?" She hesitates for a moment. "You'll be part of our child's life too. I want you to feel included. The four of us are going to be a family, after all."

I look up at her, my heart bleeding. "Sounds great," I force myself to say.

"It's odd, isn't it? The way all the pieces fell back into place. It's almost as if destiny is intervening, showing us all that Ares and I are meant to be together. The only puzzle piece that's out of place is *you*." Her eyes widen, and then she smiles. "Sorry. I didn't mean it that way. That came out all wrong."

She looks away and pops a strawberry into her mouth, chewing slowly. "I wonder how he'll feel once our child starts asking why Mommy and Daddy can't live together. There are so many questions going through my mind, you know? What will it be like when we need to attend parent-teacher meetings? Will all three of us go? And what about the immediate future? Are you both going to be there when I go into labor? Are you going to wake up in the middle of the night and help with nightly feeds?"

She runs a hand through her hair. "I know that I haven't been myself recently, but this pregnancy makes me see everything through fresh eyes. Nothing matters more than the wellbeing of my child, Raven." She pauses. "You wouldn't understand." She looks up apologetically. "I guess you never will. Ares always said he only wanted one child, after all."

I stare at her, weary, right down to my battered soul. "Hannah," I say, my voice soft. "I don't have any answers for you, but then again, it isn't

answers you want from me, is it? Why don't we stop playing games? I hear you, Han. You think I'm obstructing the happy family you would've had if I hadn't married Ares, and maybe I am. But even if I walk away now, you can't go back to what you used to have. Can't you see that he loves me?"

She smiles and drops the act, viciousness entering her eyes. "I can see that he's infatuated. It'll pass. The love he thinks he feels for you won't surpass the love he'll direct toward his child. Ares is a man of honor, and he's going to do whatever it takes to give his child the life it deserves. What do you think that'll mean for you?"

I shake my head. "How is this even supposed to work? Are you going to admit to the whole world that you slept with your sister's husband? Are you truly willing to risk your reputation?"

She grins at me. "Why wouldn't I? After all, I've got years' worth of evidence proving that it's me he dated. If I spin a tale about how we were ruthlessly torn apart because of the Windsor family's rules, the media will paint a picture of two star-crossed lovers."

My heart starts to pound at the mere thought of it. "This is going to turn into a huge scandal, Hannah. How is that supposed to benefit any of us?"

She shrugs. "I know, but I won't let my child grow up as a dirty secret. He or she will be a Windsor, after all. I won't let Ares hide our baby. If not for you, we'd be able to raise our son or daughter together." She looks away. "If you leave quietly and allow us a chance to revive our relationship, I'll keep my silence too. I'll retire, and soon enough, no one is going to care that I had a child, let alone who the father might be. My baby will be able to grow up with both parents, in a loving home. Ares has enough connections to ensure your career won't be impacted. We'll keep the rumors to a minimum."

Grandma's words are still resounding through my mind. *Hannah won't let him leave her clutches, and the new bonds between them can't be broken.*

"No," I tell her. "I'm not going anywhere, and the sooner you accept that, the sooner we can figure out how to handle the PR surrounding your pregnancy. Hannah, no matter what you do, you won't be able to sway Ares. There's a lot I'm uncertain about, but the love between us isn't one of those things. Whether you like it or not, I'm going to be by his side every step of the way. That means I'll be a permanent fixture in your child's life, too. These moments you think you'll have with him? They won't happen,

because I'll be there too. You won't be able to use your child to get to him. I suggest you start focusing on what truly is best for your son or daughter, because I assure you, alienating me isn't one of those things. I will, after all, play a key role in raising the baby."

She glances past me for a moment, and then she gasps, her fingers trailing over her temple for a moment, before her body sways. She loses her footing and collapses to the floor before I can even take a single step toward her.

"Hannah!" Ares shouts from behind me.

He pushes past me and kneels on the floor, gathering her in his arms carefully. "What happened?" he asks me. "Did you upset her somehow? Her blood pressure is already too high as it is."

He lifts her into his arms before I even have a chance to reply. As he walks past me, I see her glance at me over his shoulder, a smile on her face.

I just told her she wouldn't have these moments with Ares because I'd be there too, but I realize now… she's *counting* on me being present. This is what I'll have to deal with for the rest of my life, and there's nothing I can do about it.

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Chapter Sixty-Two

RAVEN

“I can’t believe she’s pregnant,” Sierra says, her face marred with worry. “This can’t be happening, can it?”

I nod and lean back on her sofa. In the last couple of days, I’ve found myself staying away from home more and more often. Ares is doing his best to reassure me, but his words fall flat when he hovers around Hannah constantly.

Grandma was right. It only took him a few days to start worrying about her wellbeing, and I can’t begrudge her that — not when I know it isn’t about her, but rather about their child. It still doesn’t make it any easier to watch.

“Yep,” I say, popping the P. “You’re going to be an aunt soon. Congrats.”

Sierra frowns and tilts her head. “Yeah, you… too?”

My eyes widen for a moment, and then I flinch. Sierra looks away, speechless for once. There are no elaborate schemes, no jokes. Not this time. This isn’t a situation we can make light of.

“Grandma told me she’d let me go if I want to. She’ll let us get a divorce. I guess Operation Happily Ever After failed, huh?”

Sierra sits up in shock. “Are you serious?”

I nod and stare down at my nails. “She told me that she just wants me to be happy, but I can’t tell if it was just a way of asking me to do the right thing and divorce him.”

Sierra shakes her head. “No one but Ares and you get to decide that.”

I nod. “I agree, but there’s some truth to what she told me. I spent my entire life loving your brother, and what for? In the end, she’s still standing between us.”

Sierra sits up and frowns, her phone in hand. “Someone disabled my security system.”

Moments later, Ares walks in, his stride confident and his expression unyielding as he approaches me.

“Ares!” Sierra warns, but he ignores her and shoots her a withering warning look.

He reaches for me and lifts me into his arms, one hand around my back and the other underneath my knee. I instinctively lay my head on his shoulder and breathe him in, my heart instantly at ease. No matter what we’re going through, he’s always *home* to me.

“Enough,” he tells me as he walks outs, his grip tight. “I’ve given you a few days to process what happened, but that’s as much as I’ll give you. You’re done running, beautiful. No more avoiding me. That’s not how we deal with our problems, remember?”

I look up at him as he carries me back to our home. He’s only gotten more and more handsome with age, and with each passing year, I’ve fallen for him harder. But is my love enough? Is it enough to see us through the struggles we’re about to face? The media attention, the ridicule, the co-parenting. I’m not sure if I can withstand Hannah’s continuous hits for years on end.

I tense as we walk into our house, worried Hannah might see us. I’m his wife, yet I still feel like I’m doing something wrong by being in his arms in our own home. Is this how I’ll always feel?

Ares puts me down in the middle of our room, and I take a step away from him, feeling conflicted. “Raven,” he whispers. “Can we talk, please? All you’ve done is work or run off to Sierra’s. You once asked me for honest and open communication, and I now ask the same of you.”

I glance at him and nod hesitantly. “Ares, I just don’t know what to say. That’s all it is.”

I run a hand through my hair and walk to the bathroom, expecting him to drop it, but he follows me.

“I’m not asking you to tell me pretty and calculated words, Raven. I’ve never once wanted that from you. I want your raw, unfiltered truth. Tell me every single one of your fears, so I can take them all away.”

I take off my dress, the sound of fabric hitting the floor disrupting the silence that’s fallen between us. I turn the shower on as I try my hardest to articulate the thoughts that haunt me.

“You want the truth, Ares?”

I step underneath the shower stream and inhale shakily as the warm water hits my skin. I wish he hadn’t followed me in, so I could fall apart in private. I don’t want him to witness my pain.

“I hate who I am around Hannah and you. I hate the thoughts I have, the things I feel. I’m not a bad person, Ares, yet more than once, I wished the child Hannah is expecting didn’t exist.”

Ares’s hands wrap around my waist, and I gasp as he joins me in the shower. He pushes me against the wall and cages me in. “So have I,” he admits, his forehead dropping against mine. “I know the child is innocent, Rave. Of course I know that, but I’ve also wished that she wasn’t pregnant. The happiness we found was so hard-fought, and the last thing I want to do is allow something to threaten that. Is it wrong that your happiness matters more to me than my unborn child does? Perhaps so, but that is *my* truth. I’m not a horrible person either, Raven, and I have no doubt you and I will both love this child beyond measure once he or she arrives… but we’re only human, baby.”

I wrap my arms around his neck and he steps closer to me, until our bodies are pressed together, the water raining down on us.

“I’m scared I’ll have to watch you fall for her all over again. I don’t want to watch you care about her and celebrate each pregnancy milestone together. I don’t want to hear about scans and cots and fucking pregnancy *vitamins*. I don’t want her to have everything that I wanted with you.”

He presses a kiss to my forehead and inhales shakily, his pain apparent. “I’ll do what I can to minimize that kind of thing. With Grandma forcing us to welcome her into our home, that is more complicated than I’d like it to be, but we’ll make it work, Cupcake.”

I tighten my grip on him and hug him tightly. “But you shouldn’t have to, Ares. This is such a beautiful experience, and if not for me, you’d be

enjoying every second of it."

He buries a hand into my hair and tightens his grip. "There's no point in wondering about *what-ifs*, my love. You are my *wife*, my everything. You always will be. No matter what."

"I'm scared that just isn't true. I'm scared I'll lose you to her all over again. How do I compete with the history you two share? The child you'll share? The bonds between you are endless, and no matter what angle I look at this from, I'm what stands between two people that have always loved each other. I was always just her stand-in, Ares, and she's finally ready to take her place by your side. This is everything you've ever wanted." I take a deep breath and look away, wishing I could take back the words I just uttered. I hate it when my insecurities rule me. This is *not* who I am. I barely recognize myself when faced with Hannah and Ares. Will I lose myself if I keep subjecting myself to this?

"No, Raven," he says, tightening his grip on my hair. "*You* are all that I've ever wanted. I've never been this happy before, baby. You fucking complete me, Cupcake. You're the part I never realized I was missing. You're my heart, my soul. It doesn't matter how many years I spent with Hannah, because just a few months with you brought me more happiness than years with her ever did. If she and I were meant to be together, we'd have made it work, Rave. If I truly loved her, I never would've fallen for you, and certainly not so quickly. Hell, if I loved her the way you seem to think I do, I'd never have let her go in the first place. I hear you, baby. *I hear you*, and I understand your fears, but trust me when I tell you that nothing she could do will make me waver. You're the only one I'll ever love, Raven. No man could have you and walk away from you. I know I can't."

"But you have," I snap, my eyes burning with unshed tears. "You *have*, and I'm terrified you'll do it again. I barely survived it the first time, but it'll destroy me this time around, Ares. I can't do this again."

He cups my face with both hands and frowns. "What are you talking about?"

"Sierra's 21st birthday," I whisper. "I… I came to your room at night. We'd both been drinking too much, but it didn't matter. The drinks were exactly what I needed to gather my courage. At that point, we'd been informally engaged. Your grandmother and my parents had both agreed on it, but you and I hadn't discussed it. We'd both just kind of been dancing

around the subject, and you'd been treating me the same way you treated Sierra, the way you'd always treated me, with playful kindness, and nothing more. I… I came to your room that night to ask what you thought of me and our engagement."

He stares at me wide-eyed. "What?"

I draw a shaky breath and force myself to face him. "I tried to kiss you, and you told me that I didn't know what I was asking for…"

"—and you replied that you weren't as innocent as I thought you were."

I nod, my heart skipping a beat. "You… you remember?"

He shakes his head. "No, but I've dreamed of this night. I've been dreaming about you for years, Raven." He tightens his grip on my hair and tilts my face up. "Even when you were the last woman I ever should've desired, you kept my dreams captive."

My eyes fall closed as sorrow fills my broken heart. "I gave you my virginity that night, Ares. You told me that there'd be no going back from that point onwards, and I believed you. You asked me to marry you, and the very next day, you announced that you were dating my *sister*."

He drops his forehead to mine and inhales deeply. "Raven," he pleads. "The next morning, I… I woke up with Hannah in my bed."

I push against his chest, my stomach clenching. "*W-what*?"

He refuses to let me go and nods, his eyes reflecting the torment I feel. "I remember waking up with a smile on my face, wanting more of you. I turned over, and Hannah was in my bed, naked. She smiled at me and told me that she'd enjoyed every second of the previous night. She convinced me that the woman I slept with that night was her. Tell me the truth, Raven. Was it really you?"

I sniff as tears escape my eyes. "*Yes*." My voice breaks. "It was me, Ares. I sneaked out of your room at dawn and went back to Sierra's room to freshen up, and by the time I came down for breakfast, you were sitting there with your arm around her, telling everyone you were dating. It *broke* me."

His hands roam over my body, and he lifts me up against the wall. I wrap my legs around him to hold myself up, feeling more vulnerable than I ever have before.

"When I woke up with her, I knew I lost my chance with you, Raven. I knew I could never have you after sleeping with your sister. I was as hurt as

you were, Cupcake. The one I wanted was never her. It's always been you. Only you."

I burst into tears, and he takes his time to kiss each and every one of them away. "Ares, a few days later I tried to talk to you about it. Do you remember? You were in the living room at Grandma's, and I asked you when you got together with Hannah, and what it'd mean for our engagement. I asked you if you ever felt anything for me, and if I ever meant anything to you at all." I sniff, tears falling uncontrollably. "I still remember the way my voice trembled, the fear I felt as I voiced those questions. You looked at me with such pity and shot me down. You said that you considered me *family*, and that you were going to ask Grandma to break our engagement, because you'd never see me as anything but Hannah's sister." Ares tightens his grip on me, but I can't face him. "You broke my heart, and I never recovered. Throughout the years, the two of you continued to make stabs at my heart, and I can't take much more. I can't do it, Ares. I'm begging you, please stop destroying what's left of me."

He cups my cheek and forces me to face him, his eyes filled with the same anguish I feel. "I love you," he tells me. "I loved you then, and I love you now. Hell, if I'm truly honest with myself, I never stopped."

He leans in, his lips brushing over mine as he kisses me, his touch filled with desperation. "I thought I lost my chance with you, Raven. I did what I could to ensure I could keep you in our lives."

He drops his forehead to mine and inhales shakily. "Throughout the years, I took as much as you'd give me, finding any excuse to spend some time with you. I'd attend fashion shows under the guise of having to network, just so I could catch a glimpse of you. Most of the time, I could even fool myself, telling myself I was just looking out for you when it was so much more than that. It was wrong and deep down I knew it, but I couldn't stay away. I told myself that it'd be okay so long as I never crossed the line, but *fuck*, being around you and not having you… yeah, that fucking killed me. I swear to you, I'll spend the rest of our lives making up for lost time. Hannah won't get away with this — I swear it. Raven, I will never hurt you again."

He kisses me, his touch different this time. It feels far more emotional, more desperate. "Baby," he groans, his hands moving to my ass. "I love you, Raven."

I thread my hands through his hair and grip tightly. “I love you too, Ares. I always have.”

“I’ll never let you go again,” he promises me, his lips pressed against my neck.

I reach between us and wrap my hand around his cock, placing it right where I want it. He looks into my eyes as he pushes into me, taking his time.

“I’ll never walk away. You’re it for me, baby. No matter what,” he vows.

He pushes into me all the way, and I cry out. Ares fucks me against the wall in our shower, his eyes on mine, and for a few moments, it’s like nothing else matters. The whole world melts away until it’s just me and him. I let myself believe that we can make it through anything, that nothing could ever tear us apart.

I should’ve known better.

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Chapter Sixty-Three

RAVEN

I walk into the kitchen to find Hannah sitting by the breakfast bar, dark circles marring her beautiful face. She looks up at me, her eyes filled with defeat. She knows. There's no doubt in my mind that Ares confronted her about what she did five years ago.

She huffs and looks away as she picks up her teacup, her hands trembling. I wish I had the energy to keep up the facade, but I don't. After what Ares told me last night, I can barely stand to look at her. How am I supposed to allow her into my life, knowing how much she took from me? "Why did you do it?" I ask, unable to keep the question buried.

She looks up at me and grits her teeth. "Do what?"

"That night… why did you sneak into Ares's room? Why did you pretend it was you he slept with?"

She looks away and shakes her head, avoiding my gaze. I've never seen her at a loss for words, but she is today. It's clear that she thought she got away with her deception. Just how long has she been manipulating me?

"For *once* in your life, be honest with me. Why would you do that to me? To Ares?"

She raises her head and sighs, resignation written all over her face. "Because I wanted him," she says simply, a hint of anger in her eyes. "I wanted him to look at me the way he always looked at *you*. I wanted the

prestige of being a Windsor." She crosses her arms. "When did you figure it out?"

She's so blasé about it that I struggle to push aside my fury. If she wasn't pregnant, I'd have poured her tea all over her head before asking our guards to throw her out.

"Not until last night," I admit.

She nods, her jaws locked. "That explains why Ares asked me to leave this morning. He could barely stand to look at me, because of *you*. If his grandmother hadn't stepped in, he'd have forcibly thrown me out." She smiles at me then. "You almost got what you wanted. *Almost*."

I should've known Ares wouldn't simply let this slip. I don't want to either, but what can I do? I can't risk harming the baby, and Ares shouldn't either.

I stare at my sister, the distance between us never greater. She feels like a stranger to me. Did I ever really know her at all? "You put me through years of torment and heartbreak, yet you sit here without an ounce of remorse. I'm your *sister*, Hannah. How could you do this to me?"

She laughs, the sound hollow. "You wouldn't even exist if not for me. Mom and Dad only had you because we needed you for the stem cell transplant. You literally only exist to aid my life. Even our parents didn't want you, Raven. Can't you see?" She frowns, as though her words make perfect sense. "I'm the daughter they love most, the partner that's the best fit for Ares, the person that's best suited to be a Windsor. It just made sense. It wasn't personal."

I bite down on my lip for a moment in an effort to squash the nausea her words make me feel. "You're the most entitled narcissist I've ever met, and it pains me that we're related. I can't do this, Hannah. I'm done tolerating you. I don't want you in my life. The moment you have your child, we're done. I vow to love your child like they're my own, but you're dead to me. I wish I had the courage to cut you out of my life sooner. I wish I'd recognized your selfishness for the narcissistic behavior it is. For years, I made excuses for you, telling myself and everyone around me that you were only that way because you understandably wanted to live your life to the fullest. I'm done. I'm done with you, Hannah."

She smiles at me. "Is this the part where I'm supposed to care? Should I burst into tears and beg you to forgive me? Because I won't, Raven. I don't regret a single thing I've done. The *only* things I regret are not marrying

Ares and underestimating you. I didn't think you'd have the guts to truly go after him, but it's fine. The situation is still salvageable. So go ahead, my sweet little sister. Get out of my way of your own volition."

I grit my teeth and look away, my heart aching despite the anger I feel. I should be used to this by now, yet her words still hurt. "You're—" loud buzzing outside steals my attention, and I look out the window to find a helicopter with The Herald's branding on it hovering over our property.

Alarms start to sound around the house, and the curtains start to close automatically as two of our guards rush into the room. "Mrs. Windsor, there has been a security breach. Mr. Windsor is on his way home."

One of our guards, Ben, hands me a tablet. My heart sinks when I see the photo that accompanies the headline. It's a photo of Ares and Hannah when they were younger. He's standing behind her with his arms wrapped around her and his lips pressed against her neck.

Torn apart by outdated family traditions and a vixen of a sister, the headline reads. My heart sinks as the article chronicles their relationship, supported by photos taken throughout the years. There is one photo in particular that makes me feel sick. They captured the three of us at the premiere we recently attended. Ares has his arm wrapped around my waist, but he's looking at Hannah. The angle of the photo makes it look like he's pining after her, and just looking at it hurts.

"I told you that the situation is still salvageable."

I look up from the tablet in shock. "You did this?"

She grins. "You left me no choice. I told you to walk away while I still gave you a chance. Now the entire world is going to know that you're nothing but a cheap replacement for me. Everywhere you go, people will be whispering about how sad it is that he doesn't get to be with me. Once our child is born, public sentiment will turn against you even more so. How long do you think you'll last under such scrutiny? The entire world will be telling you that you're a home wrecker. They'll tell you that you're a disgusting whore for stealing your sister's fiancé. Have you checked the comments yet?"

I scroll down to find that her words are true. The article insinuates that I seduced Ares when it was clear that Hannah had concerns about her career. I'm trembling as I grab my phone, only to find the comment sections of all of my posts filled with harassment.

I put the tablet down and take a steadying breath. Not even in my wildest dreams did I think she'd be capable of this. It's one thing for her to go after Ares, but to actively try and ruin my reputation when she knows how many of my modeling contracts depend on my public image?

"Where does it end, Hannah? Do you have any idea how damaging this is to my career? My business?"

She smiles at me. "It won't end until you return everything you took from me. Even if Ares and I can't make it work, I still won't let you have anything that belongs to me."

I bury my hands in my hair and inhale shakily. "He's always been mine, from the very start. Even if he wasn't, it's *me* he loves. Then and now."

She shakes her head. "I can fix that. I did it once before, didn't I?"

I sink down to the floor, anxiety clawing at me. Yeah, she has done this before. The deception, the lies. Is this all that awaits me? She's going to continue chipping away at everything I have, everything I *am*.

I try my hardest to breathe in, but my lungs are burning. Panic slowly starts to overwhelm me, and I give in to it.

"Cupcake!" Ares shouts. He kneels down beside me and wraps his arms around me as the first sob escapes my throat.

I throw my arms around his neck and fall apart. "I… I c-can't do this, Ares. I can't l-live like this. I can't… I can't keep doing this."

He cups the back of my head and rubs my back. "You won't have to. I'll fix this, I swear it. I'll fix it, baby."

"You *can't*." My voice breaks. With a child between them, I'll never escape her. She won't stop until she gets what she wants, and I can't withstand much more.

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Chapter Sixty-Four

RAVEN

I'm barely thinking straight as I walk to our bedroom, tears streaming down my face and Ares on my heels.

"Baby," Ares pleads. "Please. Please trust that I'll fix this."

I whirl around to face him. "How?" I shout. "How will you fix this, Ares? Articles about us are all over the internet. It isn't as simple as suing just one single magazine, and even if we do, it's too late!"

I walk into our wardrobe and yank my clothes off the hangers, my movements erratic.

"Raven," Ares says, his voice breaking. "What are you doing, Cupcake? You can't… don't do this. I beg of you, don't do this, Raven."

I shake my head and grab my suitcase. "I'm not spending another moment in the same house as her. I've tried, Ares. For years, I've tried, sacrificing my damn soul to keep her happy in the process. I can't take much more."

He grabs my shoulders and holds onto me tightly, panic flashing through his eyes. "You're insane if you think I'll let you go."

I shake my head. "I'm not giving you a choice, Ares. I can't do this. I can't spend the rest of my life being tormented by my own *sister*. I can't deal with the constant snide remarks, the guilt trips, the manipulation, the *lies*."

“Then I’ll make her leave, Raven. There’s nothing I won’t do to ensure your happiness.”

I wrap my arms around his neck and look into his eyes, my heart breaking. “You know your grandmother won’t let her leave. She wants Hannah safe and sound in the Windsor compound. She wants the two of you to figure out how to co-parent, and Grandma isn’t going to give up until you two resolve your issues. Hannah is carrying a Windsor baby, Ares. She’s pregnant with *your* child. I can’t… I just can’t do this.”

“What does that mean, my love?”

I take a step away. “I don’t know yet, Ares. I just… all I’m asking for is some time to think, nothing more. I can’t be around her right now. I can’t sit back and watch her attempt to destroy my life. Not again. I’m scared that if I stay, I’ll do or say something I’ll regret. I can’t bite my tongue right now, and the last thing I want to do is harm her health. What happens if I upset her right now, and she faints again? It’s your child that’d be at risk, Ares. I can’t have that on my conscience.”

I start to fill my suitcase, throwing things into it without thinking. The mere idea of being around Hannah right now makes my skin crawl. “Besides, I need to think about whether this is truly what I want. There’s no doubt in my mind that I love you, Ares.” I pause and turn to face him. “But let me give you a moment of honesty. I’m not sure our love can survive her. She tore us apart once, and we both know she won’t stop until she does it again. What kind of life is that? Your wife and the mother of your child fighting at every turn? What kind of environment would that create for your son or daughter? What about me? What toll will it take on me to constantly be fighting with my sister? To have her sabotage my marriage?”

Ares drops down to his knees in front of me and grabs my hands. “I know how hard it is, baby. I know I shouldn’t even be asking this of you, considering everything you’ve been through so far, everything you have yet to endure, but I’m not above begging. I can’t see a life without you, Raven. I’m begging you. Please, let’s find a way to get through this together.”

I shake my head and pull my hand out of his. “I need some space, Ares. All I’m asking for is a little bit of space to think about what I want. All my life, I’ve catered to everyone I loved, but not once has anyone asked me what *I* want out of life. Even marrying you was something I was told to do. I’m tired of living my life by other people’s rules. I can’t keep doing this. All my life, I’ve been manipulated, forced to conform until I fit in the boxes

others built for me. And I did it — with a smile on my face. What for? What did I do it for, Ares? This marriage has cost me my sanity and my career, and that would be worth it if I'd got you in return, but I didn't. Even now, after the price I've been forced to pay, it's the three of us in this marriage. It always will be. As the mother of your child, she'll always be a part of our lives. And I… I don't know if that's something I can live with."

Ares stares down at the floor, still on his knees in front of me. "One week," he says, his voice soft. "I'll give you one week to think things through while I fix the mess Hannah caused." He looks up at me. "But you should know that no matter what you decide, I will never be with her. I will never give her another chance. For the rest of my life, you are the only woman I will love. I know I've hurt you, Raven. I know I made you promises that I forgot about, but that will never happen again. You are my entire world, and I'm going to do everything in my power to ensure that I'm deserving of you, that I'm worth coming back to."

I smile at him, the feeling bittersweet. "You were always worth it," I whisper. "And I will *always* love you. I just need to ensure that the life I'm choosing to live is one that allows me to *love myself* too. Being around Hannah makes me lose sight of who I am, Ares. Can't you see?"

He grabs my hand and brings it to his lips, kissing my hand with such tenderness that it brings tears to my eyes. I see the pleas in his eyes, the silent promises.

"I will fix this," he tells me. "So come home to me in a week, okay?"

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Chapter Sixty-Five

RAVEN

My heart feels heavy as the driver that picked me up parks in a large elevator. It starts to rise, until the car is parked in the corner of my friends' living room. The passenger door opens, and my friend Alanna offers me her hand. Her arms instantly wrap around me, enveloping me in a tight hug, and that one small human gesture is enough to make me fall apart. I burst into tears, loud, heart wrenching sobs escaping my throat as she leads me to the sofa. "I… I didn't know where else to g-go," I tell her.

Alanna and I have been friends ever since she walked into my boutique in search of a wedding gown. No one has ever understood our friendship, but it's one of the most genuine and closest I've got. Alanna is one of a kind, and right now, she's the one person that can give me the solace I need, without judgement.

"I'm going to kill him," she whispers.

"Easy, Little Psycho," her husband, Silas, says.

Silas hands me a handkerchief with a small Ψ embroidered on it, a kind smile on his face. "Alanna prepared this for you the moment you called our emergency line. She even ironed it."

I take it from him with trembling hands and snuggle closer to Alanna, laying my head on her chest as she strokes my back. "Tell me what happened, Rave," she says, her voice soft.

I try to take a deep breath, but my sobs just start to come harder. Alanna tightens her grip on me, her fingers gently combing through my hair, soothing me as best as she can.

“Get him,” Alanna tells her husband, her tone in stark contrast with the gentleness she’s showing me. “Go get Ares Windsor for me. If Raven won’t tell me what happened, I’ll make him talk.”

Silas chuckles. “It’s not so simple, Ray. He’s a Windsor. I can’t just grab him without facing consequences.”

“It… it wasn’t h-him,” I choke out.

Alanna pulls away from me and wipes my tears with the handkerchief she gave me. “Then who?”

I sniff, my eyes falling closed as I gather the courage to tell her what happened, not leaving out any detail. I tell them about Sierra’s 21st birthday, the wedding, the pregnancy. By the end of it, I’m exhausted and heartbroken. “I can’t see an end to this,” I whisper. “Is this going to be my life now? Marrying him was supposed to be my happily ever after, yet somehow, it feels like the beginning of the end. Forever this time. If I stay, she’ll keep chipping away at my soul, until I end up a shell of who I once was.”

Alanna rubs my shoulders, her gaze reflecting the sorrow I feel. “Silas and I can tell you a thing or two about meddling siblings and family,” she says, her eyes finding her husband’s. I freeze for a moment, remembering that Alanna used to date Silas’s younger brother. “Trust me when I say that love truly does win in the end. I know that it feels hard right now, and you’ve made the right choice by taking a step back. Being stuck in that environment makes it hard to remember why you chose to marry him in the first place, despite the odds. I think you’ll find that some time away will give you clarity, Raven.”

She looks at Silas. “Can we get the articles bashing her taken down?”

“I was going to request it, but someone has already taken care of it. Whole servers have been taken down all around the world. The news is reporting that at least two large social media channels are completely down right now. I suspect Windsor is behind it. I’m not sure how he’s doing it, but it’s clear he’ll move heaven and earth for his wife.”

Alanna smiles at me and shoots me an encouraging look. “See? I know it’s hard right now, but that man loves you more than anything. I can’t tell

you whether that's enough to make dealing with Hannah worth it, though. I always hated the bitch. I'd gut her if I thought I'd get away with it."

I smile despite my tears and shake my head. "You really are insane, aren't you?"

"Psychotic," Silas murmurs under his breath.

The doorbell rings, and I tense. I came here because I wanted to escape for a while, not just from the media, but from my family. It should be the one place no one would come searching for me. Silas and Alanna's house is a fortress.

Silas frowns as he walks to the front door. I hear him groan in annoyance, followed by Sierra's voice. She rushes into the living room, and Alanna smiles knowingly as she shifts on the sofa, making space.

"I figured you'd be here. Are you okay?" Sierra asks. "I saw the news, and then Ares told me you left. He's a *wreck*."

"Speak of the Devil," Silas says, showing us the caller ID on his phone. It reads *Ares Windsor*.

"Windsor?"

He puts the phone on speaker and holds it out for us. "Where is my wife? The bodyguards I had on her told me they lost her trail. They were supposed to be the best you've got, so where the fuck is she? The entire fucking world is after her, and your men fucking lost her. If anyone so much as harms one single hair on her head, I will fucking kill you."

My eyes widen in surprise. Bodyguards? I should've known Ares wouldn't take risks with my safety, but I can't believe I never noticed his bodyguards.

Silas chuckles. "She's safe."

Ares falls silent. "Is she with you?"

"No."

"Where is she?"

Silas ends the call, refusing to answer him. I can't help but smile at him in gratitude. I need a little bit of space to think, and I can't do that with Ares around.

"Yeah," Silas tells me. "He's definitely in love with you. I have *never* seen him lose his cool, regardless of what situation he was put in. I once watched him foil a kidnapping attempt on Sierra without a single hint of panic crossing his face, yet you go missing for ten minutes, and his world collapses?"

I wrap my arms around myself and inhale deeply. “All I’ve ever wanted was his love, so shouldn’t that be enough? Am I being selfish?”

“*No*,” Sierra says. “I wish it was simpler, Rave, but it isn’t just Ares you need to consider anymore. Whether we like it or not, Hannah will now always be a part of your life, of your marriage. If anything, taking some time to think about whether you can accept that is the fairest thing you can do. Isn’t that better than breaking Ares’s heart down the line? Especially once a child is involved. What if they become attached to you, and then you decide you can’t stand being around them after all?”

I nod and lean back, my thoughts reeling. For at least the next few months, I’ll have to endure endless gossip and snide remarks in the industry, and that’s only just the beginning. How much more will I have to take if I choose to stay with Ares? What kind of environment are we creating for Ares and Hannah’s child? No matter how I look at it, me staying results in all of us being unhappy. Eventually, it’ll make the love between Ares and me dim too.

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Chapter Sixty-Six

RAVEN

I'm absentminded as I take a bite of the breakfast Alanna made for me. I tried not to, but I ended up scrolling through my social media feeds all night, and I found nothing but hatred directed at me. Despite Ares's best attempts, screenshots of deleted content are making their rounds across all channels. We've made it into every single gossip magazine, and they're all scrambling to create timelines of Ares and Hannah's relationship.

It came to no surprise to me when The Herald reported on Hannah's pregnancy, which only villainized me further. Now I'm not just the woman standing in between two childhood sweethearts, I'm also the evil stepmother-to-be.

Watching my love for Ares being turned into a spectacle for everyone to witness is one of the hardest things I've ever had to do. Photos I can't recall taking are being posted online, showcasing how we used to look at each other when Hannah and Ares were still dating. The media have everyone convinced that I've been seducing him for years, trying to break up Hannah and him. Everything about this reeks of her. She's always done this to me. Every single thing she's ever done to me, she's made me take the blame for, twisting our story until I'm the villain. This is what she'll do to me for the rest of our lives.

What will it be like once the baby is born? Will she somehow manage to use her own child against me too? I have no idea how long it'll take her to make Ares turn his back on me, but I suspect she eventually will.

I take a sip of my coffee, trying to take my mind off the videos of people destroying my designs, some of which were hand sown by me, all of them citing that they won't support a two-faced home wrecker. Then there's the death threats from Hannah's fans, and the loss of my own fanbase. I've had countless modeling contracts canceled without anyone so much as asking me for an explanation. She's destroying me, step by step, and it won't stop until she gets what she wants.

Silas chuckles and glances at me. "Windsor bought The Herald and several other gossip magazines. He banned them from reporting on you."

My heart skips a beat at the thought of Ares. I truly thought we could get through anything together, but eventually, he'll tire of this battle too. He can't save me when it's my own sister that's executing my fall from grace.

Silas groans when the doorbell rings, his eyes finding Alanna's. "How much do you want to bet that we're about to find more Windsors on our doorstep?"

She grins at him and shrugs. "I'd be disappointed if they didn't show up, Si. Raven deserves to be part of a family that'll love her the way her own won't. Let's see if the Windsors deserve her or not."

Silas sighs and smiles at her indulgently. "Ten paper cranes," he tells her. "That's what you'll owe me if you make me host more Windsors."

Alanna wraps her arm around me and nods. "I'll give you fifteen."

Sierra rests her head against my shoulder, her expression as crestfallen as mine. For once, she hasn't tried to give me hope, nor has she been lost in fairytales of her own making. She's been as quiet as I have been, neither of us sure of what the future might bring. I know she's been reading up on all the news about me too, and it hurts her just as much as it hurts me.

Silas looks grim as he leads Lex, Luca and Zane into the living room, Valentina following a few steps behind them. Silas shoots his wife a look, and she grins back at him reassuringly.

Alanna strokes my hair and smiles at me. "They were really worried about you. Each and every one of them called me, one by one. Since we're in charge of the Windsor family's security, it didn't feel right to keep them in the dark. I didn't tell Ares where you are, but I couldn't hide it from

them. Valentina called me, in *tears*, and I don't think I've ever seen her cry before."

Lex wraps his arm around me and squeezes tightly, and then Luca does the same. Zane musses my hair, his eyes filled with worry. "You okay?" Luca asks as they all sit down at the dining table.

Valentina grabs my hand in both of hers, her eyes red. I didn't expect to see her here, but I should've known she'd be there for me, even if it means facing Luca. "I saw the articles. Oh, Rave, what do we do? Should we make a statement? Grandma Anne instructed us to keep our silence, because she's concerned about the baby and Hannah's health. But I… I don't know. That doesn't seem right to me."

I shake my head. "It's why I left, Val. I knew I couldn't stay there without arguing with her, and I know that would threaten her and the baby's health. I can't go back home until I'm in a better state of mind. It's just that… once I go back, how long will it take before she gets to me again? Even if she doesn't, how long will I be able to withstand the media harassment?"

I run a hand through my hair, distraught. I was so close to having everything I've ever wanted, but I should've known better. Each time I find a semblance of happiness, it's yanked right out of my hands.

Lexington holds up his hand. "Shh," he murmurs. "Ares is calling."

He picks up the phone and smiles. "Yeah, I heard from her, and she told me she's fine. She's safe. No. I don't know where she is. Haven't you instructed the security team to find her?" He nods to himself. "How could they not have found her yet?" he asks, his concern clearly fake. "Okay, well, I'll keep an eye out."

Lex ends the call and puts his phone down with a sigh. "I know he promised you a week, but I don't think he'll last that long. What are you going to do?"

I stare at the people that have become the family I never had. "I don't know," I tell them honestly. "I feel like a coward for running away, for giving in."

"Nah," Luca says, holding his hand up. "Let's normalize walking away from toxic situations. You don't have to stick it out when your mental health is taking a beating, just because that's what everyone expects of you. It's okay to reassess and decide whether or not a situation is still acceptable to you. You were never given a choice when it came to Ares, but you deserve

one. Take your time, Raven. We're all here for you, and regardless of your choice, you'll never lose us. You will always be our little sister, just like Sierra is."

Lex nods and wraps his arm around me as I fight back my tears. "Whatever you decide, we'll stand by you."

Sierra and Valentina both nod in agreement. "We love you, Rave," Sierra says. "We just want what's best for you, even if that isn't Ares. I know you love my brother, but had it been me, I'm not sure I could subject myself to the absolute bullshit you'll have to go through just to be with him."

Valentina nods. "Sometimes, love isn't enough. Especially when that all you've got holding you together as the world tries to rip you apart."

"Windsors," Silas says. "You're going to want to see this."

I frown as I follow him into the living room, my eyes widening when I see Ares on the screen.

"He's broadcasting on all channels that the Windsors own, which is pretty much everything."

I raise my hand to my heart as I watch him smile through the screen, his eyes as haunted as mine must be.

"It has come to my attention that false information is being spread by the media about my wife, so allow me to address these rumors. While I don't believe our private business is for you to know, I'm well aware that you won't stop the witch-hunt you've created until you have the full story — and I need it to stop. I need you to stop harassing and hurting my wife.

To start off, I'd like you to know that it's true that Hannah Du Pont and I dated for some time. What you don't know, however, is that we were only together because of family obligations. The Du Ponts and the Windsor have had a marriage agreement in place for years now, agreeing to merge Windsor Media and Dreamessence, with the aim of leaving the company as a whole to be inherited by children resulting from this marriage.

With Hannah and I being closest in age, we seemed like the best fit, and we did everything in our power to make it work. I tried my hardest to love her, but I could never escape my feelings for my wife. In this time, I never crossed the line with Raven. Unlike what the media is reporting, there were no affairs, not even close. For years, Raven and I were nothing but friends. Until Hannah chose to walk away from the engagement our families had decided on."

He pauses and runs a hand through his hair.

“Raven is the love of my life, and walking away from our relationship is the single best thing Hannah ever could have done for me. Hannah wasn’t wronged — she left. My wife is *not* a home wrecker, nor is she the seductress so many have claimed she is. She’s just a woman who loves her family more than they deserve. She loves *me* more than I deserve, and for as long as I live, I’ll love her in return. So here I am, just a man who loves his wife more than anything, asking you to stop this witch-hunt. I beg of you, stop harassing her, stop damaging the designs she spent many sleepless nights over, stop spreading rumors. The only mistake she has ever made was loving a man that doesn’t deserve her, and for my sake, I hope she’ll never want to remedy it.”

Ares looks away for a moment. “Now that you have the truth, any lies being spread about my wife will be deemed slander. Those of you who won’t heed my warning will face legal action. Any slander we find circulating twenty-four hours from now will be reported, and we’ll leave our legal team to deal with that. I ask that you think carefully about the words you spread. Celebrities like my wife are still human, too. My wife, in particular, is the most soft-hearted person I know. Every single one of your words, she takes to heart. Do you want to be responsible for a woman crying herself to sleep, when the gossip you’re so happily sharing isn’t true? Please, I ask you to do the right thing.” He smiles then. “And Raven? I love you, Cupcake. No matter what.”

The TV goes black for a few moments, and then his message starts to replay, but I can barely see the screen through my tears.

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Chapter Sixty-Seven

RAVEN

I watch as Alanna jokes around with Sierra and Valentina, my heart full. Luca, Zane, Lex, Sierra and Valentina have been staying here with me, much to Alanna's delight and Silas's annoyance.

Valentina and Sierra have been taking turns sleeping next to me, ensuring I don't get caught in a downward spiral caused by social media. Though truth be told, there isn't much being shared anymore. Ares's plea worked, and people massively took down their posts. It sparked discussions about cyber bullying and the mental health of celebrities, but while that topic is on people's minds, so are we.

"Raven," Alanna calls.

I walk up to her, and she frowns as she pulls their security feed up on the TV. It shows Ares walking into the building, and my eyes widen.

Silas groans and grits his teeth. "Well, well, well. If it isn't my least favorite Windsor."

Alanna and I stare at him wide-eyed as he calls the police and requests that Ares be removed. He turns to me then, his jaw clenched. "You're not walking out of this house unless you choose to. I won't let him pressure you. You take all the time you need to make up your mind."

Luca walks up to me and throws his arm around me. "Agreed," he says. I lean into him, my heart overflowing. One of the things I feared most was

losing the family I gained when I married Ares, but they've made it clear that they'll stick with me, no matter what.

"I'm not sure calling the police was warranted," I say carefully.

Lex narrows his eyes at me. "Of course it was. There's no way Ares would leave otherwise, and you'd cave."

We all watch as the police asks him to leave. Ares walks out, and I tense, tempted to follow him. I've done my best to assess whether I should leave or stay, but I'm as confused as ever. We may have been able to get the media off my back, but that only solves one problem. There's still Hannah, and the child they're having together.

"Fucking hell," Zane says, pointing at the screen.

I glance at it to find Ares walking back in, the Mayor by his side, and something that looks an awful lot like a pop-up tent in his arms. He seems to be chatting happily with the Mayor, who helps him set up a tent in the middle of Silas's lobby.

"Is he serious right now?" Silas asks.

Alanna bursts out laughing. "Oh, come on, Si," she says. "This is exactly the kind of thing you would do. I think it's cute."

I start to pace, my heart wavering. More than anything, I want to go to him and throw myself into his arms, but if I do that, I also need to have the courage to deal with everything that comes with it.

"Um, Rave?" Lex says, pointing out the window.

I walk onto the balcony and stare at the helicopter approaching us, a banner attached to it. It reads *7 days. 168 hours. Tell me you're still mine.*

Valentina smiles. "I mean, you asked for a week, and he gave it to you. Can't blame the man for showing up the second your time is up."

Luca joins me on the balcony and throws his arm around me. "How do you feel, Rave?"

I smile at him. "You know what? I think I'm ready to go home to my husband. Being in the midst of it made it hard to see, but the good still outweighs the bad. It always will. The first few years might be tough, but I think I can bear with it if it means spending the rest of my life with the man of my dreams. I'm terrified, and I'm well aware it won't be easy, but it's worth it. He's worth it."

He breathes a sigh of relief and drops his head against mine. "Thank God," he says. "I don't think he'd survive losing you."

The helicopter flies back toward us, until it's hovering above the balcony. A ladder is thrown out, and my eyes widen when Ares climbs down it.

"Fucking shit," Silas grunts. "He used the banner to draw us out onto the balcony. He wanted to know if you were here. Clever fucking asshole."

I smile up at the helicopter and shake my head. He promised me he'd never let me go, and he hasn't. Part of me thought he'd be relieved if I walked away, and that he might take that chance to reunite with Hannah. I couldn't have been more wrong.

Silas smiles at me and shakes his head. "Your mind is made up, huh?"

I nod. "It is."

"I'll be honest with you, Raven. I wish you'd reconsider. My brother and I get on well now, but for some time, I had to cut him out of our lives. If I hadn't done that, he never would've learned his lesson. Your sister won't either."

"I know," I tell him. "But it's different when I *choose* to endure her. Maybe it's crazy, but I think I'm going to be okay, because I'm stepping back into the madness by choice."

Ares jumps off the ladder and onto the balcony, pausing for a moment when he sees four of his siblings standing next to me.

"Well, *shit*," Luca and Lex both say at the same time, but Sierra and Zane merely stare him down, both of them on either side of me.

"I'll deal with you later," Ares tells his siblings as he walks toward me. I take him in, my eyes roaming over the dark circles underneath his eyes, the longing in his gaze. I'll have to go through hell to be with him, but I'm about to do it with a smile on my face.

"Raven," he murmurs, almost as though he can't believe I'm standing in front of him. "One single week without you was enough for me to know that I cannot spend a lifetime without you by my side. My life isn't worth living if you're not in it. I fucked up, baby. I can see that now. I never should've allowed Hannah access to you, and instead of obeying Grandma's orders, I should've taken you away from home. I swear to you, I cut all ties with Hannah. I've ensured that all communication runs through Grandma, regardless of what it's about. I've put an entire team in place to assist her, and I've assigned her a full-time doctor, so you don't need to worry about your sister's health. I told her that it was a take it or leave it deal, and that whether or not I'd be in the child's life depended entirely on her. Everything

related to the baby and her will go through our dedicated team. We'll handle all of this on our terms, and the only times we'll see her is when *you* want to. It isn't enough, and I know it isn't, but it's a start. Everything else, I know we can figure out." He hesitates and runs a hand through his hair. "I know I'm selfish, but I can't help myself. I've loved you for as long as I can remember, Raven, and I always will. I wish I could promise you the carefree life that I want to give you, but being with me won't be easy. What I *can* promise you is that I'll always put you first, and I will do everything in my power to ensure you'll never regret choosing me. So choose me, Raven. Please come home to me."

I smile at him and brush the back of my fingers over his cheek, taking in the pure exhaustion he's exuding. "Ares, I would've come home with you even if you hadn't done all that. I love you. *No matter what.* I'm sorry I lost sight of that. I allowed my self doubt and insecurities to swallow me whole, and I struggled to see through the darkness. It won't happen again. I choose you, Ares. I will always choose you, even if it isn't an easy choice to make. Just a few days without you have shown me that I'd rather suffer with you than live a life without you."

He cups my face and drops his forehead to mine. "I won't let you suffer," he tells me. "Being with me won't come at a price, I promise. It might be hard to believe right now, but trust me when I tell you that everything is going to be okay."

I nod. "I do," I tell him. "I do trust you."

"Then let me take you home."

I nod, and he grins at me with such relief in his eyes that my heart skips a beat. I always wanted my own fairytale happily ever after, but maybe that doesn't exist. Maybe true love is just two imperfect people choosing each other despite the obstacles they'll face together, and deciding that it's worth it.

Because it is.

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Chapter Sixty-Eight

ARES

My heart feels heavy as I walk into the house I arranged for Hannah. I wish it hadn't come to this, because despite the rift between them, I know Raven still loves Hannah. I was I didn't stand at the center of their fallout. All I want to bring my wife is happiness, not torment. I know Raven. I know she's still hoping that Hannah will change, but she won't.

"Ares," she says, smiling. That intimate and smug smile of hers irritates me. I may have been able to dispel many of the rumors she circulated, but I wasn't able to get rid of them entirely.

"Congratulations," I tell her. "The doctor told me you're in the clear, and the baby is doing well. Looks like a change of scenery is exactly what you needed."

She nods. "Yeah. I love this place. It's much better than your place. We'll have to renovate that. It isn't child-friendly, and I hate the interior."

I nod as I sit down on the sofa, opposite her. "Yeah, we're not doing that. Raven put a lot of love into our home, and it's staying exactly the way it is."

She raises her brows. "I won't let you see our daughter if the environment you're taking her to isn't safe for her. I already have reservations about leaving her around Raven. What if she stages some kind of accident and hurts our baby?"

I glance down at her stomach. She's started to show now, but despite being nearly six months along, it's barely noticeable.

"Is she? Is she mine? I've asked you this before, but I need the truth, Hannah."

She hesitates for a moment before pasting on a bright smile. "Of course she is. Is this Raven again? Did you speak to her recently?"

I lean back and stare at her. "Keep my wife's name out of your filthy mouth," I say, smiling. "And explain this to me."

I hand her a folder and watch her closely as she goes through it. "It's a prenatal paternity test. Some of those blood tests the doctor did? Yeah, they weren't all regular tests. We conducted a fetal cell analysis, comparing the genetic profile of the fetal cells in your bloodstream to mine. It wasn't a match. I'm not the father." I run a hand through my hair. "But then again, you already knew that, didn't you?"

I look away, my heart breaking for Raven. I've put her through so much, and what for? I know that she's always been blinded to Hannah's flaws, but I wasn't. I fucking failed her.

"Sincerely apologize to Raven, and I'll let you get away with everything you put her through if she asks me to — and she *will*, because despite everything, she loves you."

Hannah laughs. "Why would I do that? I haven't done anything to her. She's the one who decided to run off because she couldn't take the media's pressure. I would never have done that to you. I'd have weathered any storm with you."

I shake my head at her. "She was willing to help me raise a child that isn't hers, Hannah. Her leaving had nothing to do with me — it had everything to do with *you*. I would never ask my wife to settle for less than she deserves, but this wasn't about her not wanting to weather storms with me. It was about her refusing to be torn down by her own sister for the rest of her life. It was her taking away the power you thought you had over her, and taking some time to think about what her boundaries are. I, for one, respect the hell out of her for being able to do what so many of us won't. I know I stuck around for far longer than I ever should have just because I thought it was the right thing to do, haven't you?"

She looks away and shakes her head. "I truly do love you, Ares."

I laugh. I can't help it. "Hannah, you don't love anyone but yourself. And I? I don't think I ever truly loved you at all either."

I pause to look at her for a moment, wishing things could've turned out differently, even if only for Raven's sake. "If you won't apologize to Raven, then don't blame me for the consequences."

She crosses her arms and smirks at me. "I won't," she says, one brow raised. She truly thinks she's got the upper hand, doesn't she? I suppose she forgot who I am throughout the years. I allowed her to, because the version of myself that I showed her was never the real me.

"Fine," I tell her as I grab my phone, giving my team the okay to publish the materials we prepared. I smirk as her phone starts to buzz. Within seconds, every large media outlet starts to cover the rise of her career, and every single person she slept with on the way to the top. It took me a couple of days to prepare it all, but it was well worth it.

"Did you truly believe I didn't know about the affairs? The men you'd cheat with on set?" I chuckle. "I knew. I just didn't give a fuck."

I tip my head toward her phone. "I hope you enjoy the experience you gave your sister. Perhaps now, for once, you might understand what you put her through."

I turn to walk away. "Oh, and Hannah? You will never work in the entertainment industry again. Anyone who so much as attempts to hire you is going to pay the price. I want you out of my wife's sight — I don't want her to see a single commercial, no video coverage, nothing. I'm pulling every movie I funded for you from every channel it's streaming on. I don't want her faced with even one single reminder of everything you put her through. You can disappear quietly, or I can make it happen forcibly. For the sake of the child you're carrying, I suggest you think before you act."

"Ares!" she shouts, but I ignore her pleas and walk away from her, for the very last time.

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Chapter Sixty-Nine

RAVEN

I walk through the home Ares and I built, my heart heavy. There's no trace of Hannah left — our cleaners ensured it. Yet I can still feel her here. I wonder if the scars she left will ever fade.

I'm trembling as I sit down on the sofa, still reeling from the news that was released about her. Countless affairs, and irrefutable proof that the child she's carrying is not Ares's. Climbing her way to the top like that… I never would have expected that. I can't wrap my mind around it. It's like I never really knew her at all, and it makes me feel even worse for sacrificing so much for her.

I feel like an idiot, and I'm ashamed of my subservience. I catered to her all our lives, feeling guilty for having had the childhood she's always wanted, when it was obvious that she lacked for nothing.

She's always had this way of making me feel inferior, and if not for Ares, I never would've been able to untangle myself from her web. I don't even dare think about what would have happened if she hadn't walked away from her engagement. Ares and I would both still be unhappy, secretly pining after each other. I felt so guilty for wanting him, when it's her that should've felt remorse for the way she manipulated us both.

"Mrs. Windsor."

I look up at the guard standing in the doorway and tip my head in question.

“Your mother is here to see you. Mr. Windsor instructed us not to let any of your family members in without your express permission. What would you like me to do?”

I hesitate for a moment before nodding. “Send her in.”

I sit back as I wait for my mother, a dull ache spreading from my heart. In the week I spent with Silas and Alanna, I’ve thought about her a lot. Hannah isn’t the only one I’ve been making excuses for.

“Raven,” Mom says, a hint of panic in her voice. I frown as I take her in. Her clothes are wrinkled, and her hair looks disheveled. I don’t think I’ve ever seen my mother look anything short of perfect. Despite her age, she still conducts herself as the popular actress she used to be.

“What can I do for you, Mom?”

She approaches me with fury blazing through her eyes. “How could you be sitting here so quietly when there are countless rumors circulating about your sister? I can’t leave Dreamessence to you if you can’t even handle a PR crisis.”

I cross my arms and smile at her. “And what exactly did you do to handle the PR crisis I experienced just two weeks ago? You didn’t even call me to check if I was okay. Did you know Dad tried hiring Silas Sinclair to find and protect me when he couldn’t reach me? What did *you* do?”

Mom hesitates, surprise flickering through her eyes. “Well, it was hardly a crisis. I knew you had Ares to help you take care of it.”

I laugh, the sound hollow. “I was getting dead threats. People were burning my designs on the streets, calling me a home wrecker, declaring they could never support a woman like me. All of that, and you didn’t even think to check up on me?”

Mom nods slowly. “You made it through just fine, didn’t you? Since you were able to dispel the drama, you should be able to do the same for your sister.”

I smile at her. “Why would I, when it’s my husband who created this scandal in the first place?”

“*What*?”

“If you’re just here for Hannah, I’ll need to ask you to leave. I won’t help her.” I pause for a moment. “And if you want to remain in my life, you’ll need to respect that. You have your moments, Mom, but for the most

part, you've never really been a mother to me. Your only concern has always been Hannah, and I'm tired of it. I don't need you to prioritize me, mother. But I do need you to stop tearing me down in favor of her. I'm tired of the constant comparison, the snide remarks. If we're going to have any kind of relationship at all, it'll be on my terms."

She stares at me wide-eyed. "What has gotten into you, Raven? I know you've always been jealous of your sister, but you're being unreasonable."

I huff and shake my head. "It's clear you heard me speak, yet you're not listening. Maybe you will, someday, but I'm not going to sit around and wait for a moment longer."

I rise to my feet and nod at Ben, who is standing in the corner of the room. "Please see my mother out. Deny her access to my home going forward."

"Raven!" she snaps. "Have you completely lost your mind? If you're going to continue acting this way, I won't give you the shares I hold in Dreamessence."

I smile and lean back on the sofa. "I don't need them. I never had any interest in your company, Mom. And let's be real. You never wanted me to inherit it in the first place. This is just another excuse to give Hannah the company. She's welcome to it." I stare her down. "I suppose that does mean Ares will walk away from the merger, but so be it. Anything for your precious daughter, huh? Good luck to both of you."

I nod at Ben, and he approaches her. Unease flickers through my mother's eyes, but I don't have it in me to care anymore. I have nothing left to give.

My heart breaks as I watch her walk away. Part of me hopes that she'll eventually realize how she pushed me away, but a larger part of me knows she won't.

"I'm proud of you, Cupcake."

My eyes widen, and I look behind me to find Ares leaning back against the wall. He pushes off it and approaches me with a sweet smile on his face.

His eyes never leave mine as he kneels in front of me, his hands reaching for mine. "There's somewhere I want to take you today. Will you let me?"

I grin at him. "Surely by now you know that I'll follow you to the ends of the world?"

He smiles back at me and grabs my chin, leaning in. “I’m counting on it,” he whispers, his lips brushing against mine.

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Chapter Seventy

ARES

My heart is pounding wildly as I lead Raven to the helicopter that's waiting for us. I've negotiated more multi-million dollar deals than I can count, and never before have I felt fear like I feel today.

"Are you okay?" she asks as I buckle her in. "You're so quiet."

I nod, unable to suppress my nerves as I sit down next to her.

"Where are we going?" Raven asks through the headphones.

I smile at her. "You'll see."

I hold her hand tightly as we fly toward the cabin where our story started. I know that there's no point in pondering on what-ifs, but lately I can't help but wish things had played out differently. What if I'd drank a little less and actually remembered my night with Raven? Would we have been happily married years ago? We'd have made so many more memories together, and we'd both have saved each other from so much pain.

"Wow!" Raven points out the window, a huge smile on her face when she sees the hundreds of flowers spread across the lawn. She's so ridiculously beautiful. I still can't believe she's finally mine.

"Come on," I tell her once we've landed, offering her my hand. The way she looks at me… yeah, I'll never get enough of it.

My heart races as I walk her to the platform I had built, hundreds of flower arrangements surrounding us. I've tried my best to make the scene

look as romantic as possible, but I'm scared it's not enough.

Raven giggles when I turn toward her. "What is this, Ares?"

I bite down on my lip for a moment, gathering my courage. Fucking hell. My fucking palms are clammy, that's how nervous I am. This is definitely a first for me. But then again, it's only fitting, since she's the only one I ever lose my cool over.

"Raven," I tell her. "I wanted to take you back to the place where it all started, because there's something I need to ask you."

I take the ring box I've had for far longer than I care to admit out of my pocket and pop it open. Raven's eyes widen, and I drop down on one knee.

"Raven Windsor, you are the love of my life. If you were to ask me when I fell in love with you, I'm not sure I could answer… because the truth is that I can't remember a time when I didn't love you. All I can tell you is that with each passing day, I love you *more*. You are the best thing that has ever happened to me, the light of my life, my favorite part of every day. You are the woman of my dreams, the one I thought got away. I wish I could go back in time and right the wrongs we've endured, but I can't, baby. All I can do is promise you that I will make up for the time we lost, each and every single day we spend together. If you let me, I will do everything in my power to protect your smile, to bring you happiness. There is nothing I won't do for you, Raven."

I inhale shakily, my hands trembling slightly.

"When you and I got married, there's a lot we missed out on. There's a lot you didn't get to experience, so let's start over, my love. I want you to have everything you deserve, everything we would've had. So here, in the place where we shared our first kiss, I'd like to ask you again… Raven, will you make me the happiest man alive and marry me?"

I look up at her, a strange sense of fear holding me captive.

Raven smiles, her eyes filled with tears, and then she nods. "Yes, Ares. I'll marry you. If I could do it all over again, I'd still choose you. I will always choose you."

I grin as relief rushes through me and push the engagement ring I bought her onto her finger, right against her wedding ring. It's a perfect fit.

I rise to my feet and wrap my arms around my wife. "I love you, Raven. Let's do it all over again. Let's start at the beginning. I want you in a wedding dress of your own choosing, in a venue we both love, surrounded

by people we actually care about. I want a wedding that's all about us, and not about our obligations or our families. I want *you*."

She looks at me with tears in her eyes and nods. "You really are my every dream come true, you know that?"

She glances down at her ring in wonder before looking back up at me. "How did you know?" she asks. "This is exactly what I wanted."

I hesitate and brush her hair out of her face. "Do you remember that day I asked you to come shopping with me, and I took you to a jewelry store? You were glancing at rings for a moment or two, your eyes lingering on a ring similar to this one." She nods, no doubt recalling that it's Hannah we were buying a present for that day. "I called Laurier a day later and requested that he make this ring. I wanted something reminiscent of the ring you loved in that store, but I wanted something no one else in this world would have. It was stupid, because back then there was no way I could give it to you, but I had to have it. I don't know… maybe a small part of me knew that someday, we'd be together."

"That day," she whispers. "When I saw that ring, I remember thinking to myself that I couldn't imagine marrying anyone but you."

I drop my forehead to hers, my heart aching. "We lost so much time," I murmur. I'd do anything to go back in time and have a second chance. If I could do it all over, I'd never let anyone or anything get between us.

"Maybe we did," she says, "but maybe this is for the best. We both had time to grow, to become better versions of ourselves than we would have been when we were young. Our lives shaped us, Ares, and while I'd do anything to have had those moments with you, to erase some of the memories I have of you… part of me is also grateful that we're standing here together as the people we are today. I'm grateful for every lesson, every twist and turn our lives took, because in the end, it all led me back to you."

I cup her cheek gently and nod. "It did," I whisper, leaning in, my lips brushing over hers. "And I will never let you go again."

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Epilogue

ARES

I slip into my wife's dressing room and lean back against the wall, taking a moment to just watch her. Her makeup artist is putting the final touches on her, and she looks fucking magnificent. Tonight, her long hair is loose and wild, spread all over her body, accentuating the cream-colored gown she's wearing.

It's the same gown I watched her draw on Hannah's birthday. Seeing it on her tonight is surreal. Her creativity knows no bounds, and I couldn't be more proud of her.

Her eyes light up when she sees me, and I push off the wall. I grin when she dismisses everyone in her room, no doubt reading the look in my eyes.

"Ares," she says, smiling. I'll never tire of the way she says my name. On her lips, it's simultaneously a prayer and a sin.

"Baby," I whisper. "You look far too fucking beautiful in this. I can't take this. I can already imagine what all your pervs will have to say about the photos of this show."

She chuckles. "It's the last one, my love," she promises. "This will be the last show I walk as a professional model. Going forward, I'll only model for my own brand whenever I feel like it."

"It's only fitting that the last show you walk is also your own first fashion show. One door is closing, but another is opening for you."

She nods. “I thought it would be nice symbolism, don’t you think?” She grabs my tie and twirls it around her fingers. “Though, I will say… I’ll miss *Iwanttolickravensknee’s* comments on my photos. I wonder what he’ll have to say about this final show.”

I chuckle and shake my head. “I have it on good authority that he’s obsessed with you and will continue to DM you perverted shit.”

“Is that so?” She laughs. “Maybe I should start giving him private shows.”

I nod. “I really think he’d like that.” I wrap my hand around her waist and pull her closer. “Moment of honesty… I’ve always hated the way everyone looks at you on stage.” I lower my lips to hers, smearing her lipstick with a kiss. “I never interfered because I have the utmost respect for you, my love, but I always wanted everyone to know that you’re mine.”

She lifts her hand to my face and cups my cheek. “I’m relatively certain that my wedding ring is visible even to those sitting in the back rows.”

I smirk as I pull her dress up until I’ve got it bunched around her hips. “It’s not enough, Cupcake.” I lift her on top of her dressing table and spread her legs. “As every man stares at you, I want to make sure that your thoughts are only on *me*.”

She grins at me when I trail a finger up her thigh. “No fucking panties again,” I growl.

Raven giggles and buries a hand through my hair. “Ares,” she says, her voice husky. “When you’re in the room, other men just fade away. You’ve always been the only one for me.”

I smirk when I realize that she’s rapidly getting wet for me. Just one touch, and she’s desperate for my cock. I slip two fingers into her, loving the way she moans for me. “I fucking love you,” I groan as I unbuckle my belt.

I free my cock, and she gasps. “Ares,” she warns. “I need to be on stage in twenty minutes.”

“I know,” I tell her as I align my cock. “I’m going to fuck you so hard that you’ll still be feeling my cock when you walk down that catwalk. The whole world is going to want you, but with every step, you’ll be reminded of who you belong to.”

I push into her, and her eyes fall closed in delight. “Look at you, baby. You’re such a fucking slut, my love. You’re smiling so happily as you take

my cock in your dressing room. Anyone could walk in at any moment, but you don't care, do you?"

She shakes her head, her eyes glazing over as I thrust into her deeply. "Don't stop," she pleads.

I chuckle as I lift her hips up slightly to make sure I'm hitting her g-spot, fucking her the way she loves. "Ares," she moans. "Fuck, *Ares*."

I will never get enough of her. I could listen to her moaning my name all day, and soon, I'm going to. After this fucking show, I'm taking her home, and I'm not letting her leave our bed for more than ten minutes at a time for a week straight.

"Oh God," she moans. "*More*."

I smirk as I fuck her harder, giving it to her the way she needs. "I don't want to hear a single complaint about your pussy being sore later. Remember, you're asking for it."

She looks at me, her lips parted, her eyes filled with lust. "Give it to me," she tells me, and I do.

I fuck my wife with all I've got, sending countless bottles and brushes flying off her dressing table as I take her. Her pants come quicker, until I've got her saying my name like it's a fucking prayer.

"I can't…" she moans, and then her muscles contract around my cock, taking me right off the edge with her. I come deep inside her, making a mess of her pretty pussy, and I smile as I do so.

"Fuck yes," I groan, pulling out to take a look. I smirk as I push my cum back into her pussy. "You're going to walk down that fucking catwalk with my cum dripping down your thighs," I tell her. "So you don't forget for even a single second who the fuck you belong to."

She nods at me, her eyes filled with equal parts love and lust. I can't believe I made this beautiful woman my wife. She makes me feel like a fucking king, and I can't wipe the smile off my face as I kiss her.

"I'll leave you to get ready, Cupcake," I whisper against her lips. "I'll be sitting in the front row, cheering you on."

I take a step away from her, but she grabs my hand and pulls me back. I chuckle as she kisses me one more time before pushing against my chest, sending me off. Yeah, this is a fucking obsession. Just leaving her for a few moments hurts.

"Why are you smiling like that?" Sierra asks as I join her in the seats reserved for us. I smirk at my sister, and she pretends to gag. "You two are

disgusting."

I elbow her, indicating for her to shut up as Grandma walks up to us, Raven's dad in tow. I smile at him, and he shakes my hand. Raven no longer speaks to either her mother or sister, but her dad continues to show up to support her in every way he can. "I'm grateful you're here," I tell him, meaning every word. He nods at me, a hint of regret in his expression. He no doubt wishes he didn't come alone, but I much prefer it. Hannah and her mother are made of the same cloth, and Raven is better off without them.

She doesn't need them. I glance at everyone that showed up for her final show. My Grandmother, Zane, Lex, Sierra, and even Silas and Alanna are here. Dion flew back for her show and should be here any minute now. She's loved, and she doesn't need anyone but us. We're her family now.

Luca walks up to us, and we all freeze when we notice Valentina behind him, their hands entwined. He smiles at us while Val keeps her gaze downcast.

"Grandma," he says as he takes a seat next to her. He seats Valentina next to him, in the seat we reserved for Dion. Then he turns to Grandma and grins. "Valentina and I got married," he says simply. "I'll need you to cancel my engagement."

Grandma's eyes roam over the two of them, her disbelief apparent. "We'll see about that," she says, turning away from them to look at the stage instead.

What? I was so certain that Grandma would instantly accept Valentina, so what the fuck is going on? Luca shoots me a helpless look, and I shake my head, at a loss. When we egged him on, we didn't expect him to fucking go out and marry Val, but then again, that was the end goal, and Luca is nothing if not efficient.

The lights dim and the show starts, and everything else fades away when my wife walks onto the stage. She's beautiful, as always, and I can't believe she's mine.

I'm not worthy of her, but for as long I live, I'm going to do everything in my power to ensure she never realizes it. I'm going to make her so happy that the future ahead of us always overshadows the past that haunts us. For the rest of our lives, I'll show her what it's like to truly be someone's priority, because that's what she is to me. She's everything.

Want more of Raven and Ares? Click here to read a deleted chapter featuring their second wedding ceremony.

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